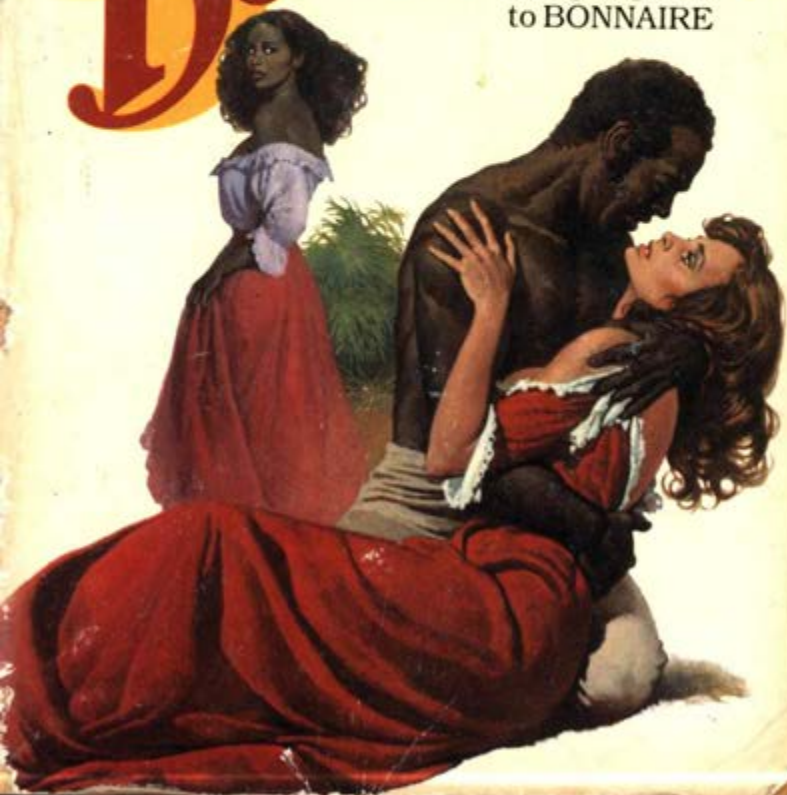


Delphine  
Marlowe



# SLAVES OF BONNAIRE

The  
searing sequel  
to BONNAIRE



## AWAKENING

She looked up, startled, comprehending with heart-stopping clarity that he'd been ready to lay down his life for her. A shaft of moonlight through the shutters fell across his eyes, revealed the adoration there, the yearning and the fear to voice a thought so close now to the surface, so intense that she could almost hear it sounding in the air between them.

Her response was instant, unequivocal. She hugged him tighter, whimpering with the urgency of overwhelming need as flesh and spirit told her that at last the time had come to give herself, to give her all, to be a woman for this man.

# *Slaves of Bonnaire*

**DELPHINE MARLOWE**



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TRADE  
MARK



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# PART ONE

## *Trelawny Parish, Jamaica: 1823*

For the first time in months, Lili Osborn did not dress in black. At dawn, wakened out of fitful dreaming by a conch shell sounding through the fields, she rose from the four-poster bed, searched through her cabinets and extracted the whitest costume she could find. Thrilled with its pristine brightness, she quickly donned the flouncy overdress and muslin. Satisfied, she hurried from the chamber, hungry for the adventure of this day. The time had come to begin anew, to return to living. Her pretence of mourning was over.

Downstairs the huge rooms of the mansion lay still and sombre. Lili raced about the massive gallery, yanking windows upward, flinging shutters wide - willing air and life back into the Great House at Bonnaire. When it was done she stood between a pair of tall French windows that opened onto the verandah, breathing in the sweetness of oleander and rich, damp earth.

Beyond the balustrade morning dew sparkled on the lush, green lawn. Lili gazed past the overseer's cottage, over the cluster of shops and stables toward the cane fields burnished to a coppery sheen by the sun's first golden rays. Everything was hers, as far as the eye could see: the meadows, the sugar works, the cool, rich woodland that stretched to the ocean. All of it, Bonnaire, and she its mistress.

'Massa Charles - dat you in dere?' A raspy voice called out good-naturedly, accompanied by shuffling footsteps across smooth, zebrawood floors.

Lili turned, smiling at the sound of Mirtilla's presence, warmed by the simple sweetness that had comforted and soothed her for as long as she could

remember. One of the first things she had done when the plantation became her property was to coax the old cook out of retirement and up from the slave village to live in the Great House close-by, available, never more than calling distance away, just in case.

'Juba-Lili! Look on you, all pretty-pretty.'

Lili stiffened at the sound of her proper African name, then relaxed, remembering she had no secrets from the old woman. Dutifully she stood for Mirtilla's inspection, enjoying the soft clucking sounds of approval.

'Massa Charles, him sure be s'prise when him see you,' the woman exclaimed, lifting a wizened hand to smooth aside a sable tendril tumbling over Lili's silken white cheek. 'All de time you up dere him askin' when Missy stop dat foolishness an' say-out who she be.'

A niggling pang of conscience wrestled with a lifelong habit of secrecy, erasing the smile, reshaping Lili's beautiful features into a tight, guarded expression.

'I did not say that I intend to make any public ... confessions,' Lili replied softly, shuddering at the idea. 'I have simply decided to come out of seclusion,' she added, gazing through a window, unable to summon enough courage to admit the entire truth.

Mirtilla was not fooled. Exhaling loudly, she folded her beefy arms across her chest and imposed her mammoth body between the girl and the rapidly brightening vista outside. 'Bes' you tink on dat some more 'fore you say you Granny Fushabah. Is she what save you when you born? Is she what bring you in dis place an' make dem Osborns keep you like dem own? Is she what ...?'

'Yes, Mirtilla, I know. I *know*!' Lili turned from the wounded, accusing eyes and hurried to the open doors, inhaling deeply, suffocated still by the reality, the impossibility of her situation. Vaguely she wished that she had never learned the truth about her origins. Perhaps it would have been better if she had not been told, if she had been allowed to live in ignorance.

Certainly then there would have been no confrontation, and no killing.

The rattling of carriage wheels along the drive rescued Lili from her contemplations and drew her toward the huge front door.

'That must be Charles now,' she said, grateful for the interruption. 'Ask the kitchen girls to bring some breakfast onto the verandah, will you?' she said brightly. But as she swung the heavy door inward Lili stopped short, surprised by the sight of an open phaeton rolling up before the wide, stone steps.

The carriage stopped and a beautiful red-headed girl stepped out, resplendent in a gown of gleaming russet edged from shoulder to shoulder in pale and delicate lace.

'Miss Osborn?' she asked, smiling. 'I am Victoria Sloane. I hope I have not chosen an inopportune time to call.'

'Why no ... not at all. Welcome to Bonnaire,' Lili replied, matching the smile with one of her own as she glided down the steps. 'I'm rather partial to the morning hours myself. 'Tis so much cooler and more civilised,' she said, affecting a posture of ladylike refinement which, despite twenty-two years of practice had not quite, somehow, become second nature.

'If you can consider anything upon this island civilised,' the girl answered, wrinkling her nose in such a way that sent the spray of freckles there clustering together. 'Having been away so long I wonder how I shall ever grow accustomed to this place again, and its dreadful climate.'

'Oh, yes - you've been in England. How exciting for you!' Lili said, suppressing a twinge of jealousy at the sight of the other's more fashionable attire: the lowered, nipped-in waistline; the pleated leg-of-mutton sleeves ballooning to the elbow; the broad-brimmed hat piled high with plumage. 'We've often heard your father speak of it on Sundays after church.'

Victoria whipped open a flowered fan and fluttered it beneath fiery green eyes, sparkling angrily. 'He may have spoken of me then, but goodness knows all he talks about nowadays are the goings-on in Parliament. If I must hear another word about the rising influence of abolitionists or the threat of emancipating slaves, I shall surely perish of boredom. Heavens, such calamity!' She waved her driver off in the direction of the stables. 'That, in part, is why I've come here,' she confided, looping an arm through Lili's and drawing the girl along with her toward the steps. 'I am near drowned in talk of profits and losses and in desperate need of a friend.'

'And just in time for breakfast,' Lili added wryly, impressed by this girl's straightforward manner - envious of her outspoken ways - certain that such confidence could only be the result of travel and a genteel education. 'You will join me I hope, Miss Sloane?'

'Victoria ... *please* ... and thank you, yes, but only for a cup of tea. I have dozens of errands that must be completed before the day is out. Heavens, can you believe we've only a fortnight remaining until Christmas?'

On the verandah Lili took her place at a little table set for two, working to prevent an indelicate enthusiasm from bursting into the open. The presence of Victoria Sloane - the companionship of the daughter of one of the most prominent and influential planters in all of Cornwall County - was more than she could have dared hope for; a perfect liaison for the furthering of her own secret aspirations. Perhaps now, at last, the tightly budded promise of social fulfilment was about to blossom for her.

'You must tell me everything,' Lili insisted as a pair of Negro girls brought platters of fruit and freshly baked cassava cakes. 'All about Europe, and what it is like to live in London.' Her dark eyes grew wider. 'How thrilling it must be to move constantly among people of style and quality.'

'Indeed, a great deal more thrilling than a lifetime of banishment in this God-forsaken colony, where sons of

noblemen have no more polish than their slaves who work the land. My dear, one has only to set foot in Jamaica to realise how terribly *creolised* we English can become. Certainly you must agree?’

‘I’m sorry but I could not say,’ Lili replied softly. ‘I, myself have lived all of my life in Jamaica. I know no other way.’

‘Oh dear! I have begun our friendship quite upon the wrong foot, I see,’ Victoria reached to grasp Lili’s hand. ‘Do forgive the blunder, I implore you! ‘Tis only that I am so terribly misplaced of late, so peevish and out of sorts. Being uprooted abruptly and recalled to Jamaica by my father with no warning and no reason why, I feel as though my entire life has been disorganised. And you are my only hope, Lili – my one chance for companionship in this entire parish.’ Her voice dropped solemnly. ‘You know, of course, I have no sisters or brothers?’

‘Yes, I know,’ Lili answered with a sympathetic smile, sincerely moved by the girl’s sorry plight and down-trodden look.

‘And, like yourself, no mother to turn to in my distress – although, of course, your own dear mother is in England, and not perished like my own of some terrible fever.’

Lili swallowed hard, averting her gaze, unable, unwilling to answer.

‘*There* ... you see? We are quite alike, you and I,’ Victoria continued, unaware of Lili’s evasion. ‘But your experience is so much greater than my own. As you say, you’ve lived here all your life. Surely you’ve devised some methods, some little schemes that enable you to make the acquaintance of interesting men upon this island. Do you attend the Governor’s parties at Kings House? Or the parish balls, perhaps? Oh, tell me, Lili, please! How does one survive in this colony? How does one find suitors before one grows too old?’ She stared across at Lili, desperation plainly revealed in pursed, quivering lips and the frantic movement of eyes and lashes.

Lili had all she could do to keep from bursting into

laughter. How remarkable! What a revelation! Here was a young lady blessed with beauty and unquestionable social position asking, begging, for *her* advice and assistance. If Victoria only knew - if she had any inkling of the truth ...

'I am afraid you have come to the wrong person,' Lili confessed as she unlocked a tea-caddy and thrust a spoon into tender green leaves. 'My own parents were quite strict with me you see. Never was I permitted more than a passing acquaintance with eligible young men. Indeed, since my grandmother's death this past summer, and my parents' subsequent departure from Jamaica, I fear I've been something of a recluse. All my time is spent in the effort to maintain Bonnaire. Actually, were it not for my good neighbour, Charles Rutland, I fear that I myself should be quite forlorn at this very moment.'

'Oh ... I see,' Victoria replied glumly. 'How fortunate that you have such a friend and that Mister Rutland's wife holds no objection to his helping you as he does.'

This time Lili allowed the laughter past her lips. 'His wife?' she repeated. 'No, no - Charles is quite unattached. I daresay any woman would be hard pressed to keep pace with him, given his interest in politics and the law and any number of other projects he embraces. Heavens! Charles has energy for half a dozen men.'

'Has he?' Victoria brightened. 'And would you think me terribly forward if I inquired further about this intriguing young gentleman?' She leaned closer. 'Is this Mister Rutland someone I might find ... attractive?'

'Indeed he is quite handsome,' Lili replied, brimming with pride at the thought. 'I am sure you would be delighted to make his acquaintance.'

'Oh yes, I certainly shall!' Victoria clapped her hands together. 'You'll arrange it, won't you Lili? You see, I was quite right to come here. Things are already taking a turn for the better. We are going to be wonderful friends, you and I. For the first time, Father was right.'

Lili blinked, her interest rising. 'Your father? What has he to do with this, if I might ask.'

Victoria glanced downward and set her fan to rapid motion, but not in time to cool a flush of colour rising along her cheeks. 'In truth, I must confess that it was he who sent me here,' she answered sheepishly. 'Not for the purposes I've stated, naturally, but to extend an invitation on his behalf to join us at Christmas dinner. To be our guest of honour, in fact.'

Lili's jaw dropped open. 'Me?' she burst out, unable to believe this. 'Forgive me if I seem ungracious, but why should Patrick Sloane wish to bestow such honour upon the likes of myself? We have met, surely, but only to exchange common courtesies appropriate among neighbours.'

Victoria raised her cup and sipped slowly at the steaming brew. 'Father may seem a burly sort, but underneath that quarrelsome exterior I assure you he is quite sentimental,' she replied, without meeting Lili's gaze. 'Frankly, he's expressed concern that no one hereabouts has seen you since the shocking death of your grandmother, and said he would have come over to inquire after your well-being personally, were it not for the demands made upon his time by this terrible controversy raging within the Assembly.' Now, she looked at Lili over the rim of her tea cup. 'Actually, I suspect his absence has more to do with the seeming impropriety of a widower calling upon a lady so much the younger. Can you believe that, Lili? Such old-fashioned and out-dated manners! I daresay Father's mind still dwells somewhere in the Dark Ages.'

'Not at all,' Lili replied, flattered, thrilled by such unexpected chivalry. 'I find that rather sweet and admirable. Please inform your father I shall be delighted to accept his invitation.'

'Oh Lili, I'm so glad!' Victoria cried. 'I wish there was more time to stay and chat. Certainly, you and I have many things to talk about and so very much in common. We are going to be good friends, the very best of friends - I'm sure of it!' She turned and waved toward the driver of her carriage.



'Yes, the best of friends,' Lili replied, distracted and a little overwhelmed as she accompanied Victoria down the steps. She stood then and watched the phaeton roll away, filled with excitement and a wild, new enthusiasm for her own future. Finally, when the carriage passed out of sight, she turned and hurried towards the stables, bursting with the need to find Charles and tell him her good news.

Lili's thoughts were racing as she drove her gig along the dusty road to Allamanda Hall. As the little vehicle clattered past the iron gates she felt as bright and cheerful as the brilliant morning sun. It appeared her luck had finally reversed, as though to make amends for all those years of self-denial she'd been forced to suffer.

*And why not?* Lili reasoned, savouring the miracle of self-determination, so new to her. Was the better part of her youth not lost already, spent in the shadow of other people's ambition and pretence? Had she not been trapped between the power of a white woman pretending to be her grandmother and the designs of *Okomfo*, for whom Lili had been the instrument of long awaited Ashanti justice? Certainly, the time was long overdue for her to take charge of her own affairs, to set about the pursuit of personal satisfactions. Now that Bonnaire was hers alone there was no reason to delay her full emergence into the very lifestyle paraded before her all these years, not to enjoy the privileges and prerogatives dangled maddeningly just beyond her reach.

Even Charles would have to agree with *that*!

Eager to share her plans with him, Lili drove swiftly past the low stone barn half tucked into the hillside, and up before a row of wooden stables. Smiling happily, she tossed the reins to a groom, hopped to the ground, then hurried through an opening in the wooden rail fence.

She spotted him on the rear verandah of the pink, plastered house that overlooked the sea, hunched low in his chair, long legs propped up on the balustrade.

Engrossed in a stack of papers balanced in his lap, Charles did not notice her, and Lili seized the opportunity to watch him unobserved - needing this time to still a cascade of emotion that overwhelmed her at the sight of him.

He looked exactly like their father, Lili had been told; tall and blond with azure eyes that shone bright as the ocean flowing toward the beach a hundred feet below. Despite the countless promises she'd made herself these last months, Lili felt great sadness creeping over her, followed by the sting of anger. All those wasted years! All that empty, lonesome time squandered needlessly when she could have known that Charles was her very own brother.

'Charles!' She called his name now, eager for the acknowledgment of his smile, the warmth and reassurance of his arms outstretched toward her in joyful welcome.

She was not disappointed. 'Lili - dearest girl!' He set his papers aside at once, leapt to his feet, arms reaching in her direction even before she'd climbed the verandah steps. 'Look at you,' he said, his gaze drinking in the sight of her gay attire, her cheeks flushed with excitement. 'Do these eyes deceive me or has a princess deigned to grace our humble shores with her dazzling presence?'

Lili giggled and allowed herself to be hugged, never tiring of Charles's delight in her, never able to get enough. "'Tis over,' she announced when he released her. 'I am done with hiding and ready to rejoin the world. The past can be laid to rest as far as I am concerned. 'Tis only the future that interests me now.'

'And high time, too!' Charles answered, drawing her into the shade of the verandah where a cool pitcher of tamarindo awaited. 'You have languished far too long behind the walls of Bonnaire. A momentous era in Man's destiny begins, my dear. We are on the brink of seeing justice done at last. As never before in history, England

now has the opportunity to bring about the most glorious act of legislation ever created by an assembly of any nation in the world!

Lili accepted the drink Charles poured for her and settled in a chair, content to let him ramble on, accustomed to the bursts of rhetoric so typical of him.

This time, however, Lili found herself growing restless as he continued to expound upon the new humanitarianism gaining ground in England. Impatiently she tapped her toe against the floor-boards, eager for a pause so she could share her own excitement.

'Lili, I suspect you are not listening to me,' Charles said, with a lopsided grin. 'Do I sound too much the lawyer and less the brother you have come to see?'

She reached to squeeze his hand affectionately. 'No more so than usual,' she chided. 'Tis only that I've heard so much about the matter of the slaves, I do grow weary of it.'

'Weary, eh?' Charles was reproachful. 'Of all people, Lili, I should think that you would be most eager for news of our progress. My girl, you confound me thoroughly.'

Lili willed aside a flash of annoyance, more interested in telling what she'd come to say than defending her need to do it. 'I have other news,' she announced, a touch of mischief in her smile. 'There's been a visitor to Bonnaire this morning.'

'Indeed? So early?' Charles sat down beside her. 'And who was that, might I ask?'

'None other than Victoria Sloane,' Lili said triumphantly. 'The daughter of Patrick Sloane himself, if you please - come to call on me and share a bite of breakfast.'

'Oh, I see.' Charles leaned back in his chair, eyes thoughtful. 'So she's returned from the continent, has she? She's making the rounds to rally support on behalf of her father, no doubt.'

Lili stared at her brother, frustrated by his response. 'Quite the contrary,' she replied. 'The young lady called

to make my acquaintance on her own behalf, then to extend her father's invitation to be his guest at Christmas dinner.'

'You can't be serious!' Charles blurted. 'Surely you must know that Patrick Sloane is my strongest adversary in the House. Why just as you arrived I was reviewing the minutes of the Assembly, preparing a speech of rebuttal against the man's unconscionable defence of human bondage. You must decline this invitation without delay. Your presence at his table is unthinkable, and upon Christmas Day, to boot. Really, Lili!'

Lili looked away, sorely disappointed at her brother's inability to see beyond the scope of his crusade, to realise what this opportunity could mean to her. When she spoke again her throat was tight, the words clipped sharply round the edges. 'I am sorry, Charles, but I fail to understand how there can be any connection between accepting a neighbour's hospitality and hindering the cause of human freedom. Surely, Mister Sloane's invitation arises out of consideration for a young lady fresh from mourning for her grandmother, and ostensibly alone at Christmas-time. It has nothing whatever to do with politics or commerce.'

'Dear heavens, Lili, are you really so naive?' Charles blurted, jumping to his feet. 'There is talk, Lili - merely rumours, mind you - but talk nevertheless, that Patrick Sloane is not quite as solvent as he appears.'

'Please Charles, what end is served by your participation in such nasty, unkind speculation? Oxford Hall is one of the largest plantations in Trelawny, with well over five hundred slaves. I am sure ...'

'Exactly the point I was getting to,' Charles replied. 'If emancipation becomes a reality, and there is every indication that it will, Patrick Sloane is sure to feel the backlash worse than any of us. On the other hand, were he to have the assets of a woman like yourself at his disposal, a woman with an estate nearly as large as his own, who could raise the considerable sum of money its sale would undoubtedly command ...'

'Charles, honestly! I think this time you've gone beyond the limits of reason. Mister Sloane has merely invited me to dinner, and you've twisted his kindness into some unscrupulous plot to carry me off and steal Bonnaire.'

'Not at all,' Charles insisted. 'Believe me, Lili, you do not know this man as I do. I have heard him in the Speaker's Chamber. He's a madman absolutely crazed with the need for power over others.'

'Perhaps it is the passion of your own convictions that causes you to judge him so harshly.'

'No doubt you would interpret it that way,' Charles snapped. 'For reasons which escape me, women seem to be struck blind by Mister Sloane's oily charm. They cluster round the man like bees to honey, never perceiving the evil behind that smile, the cruelty and heartlessness that fester there. And he has his way with them, Lili - one after another. Shamelessly. Carelessly ... as casually as though they existed for no other purpose than to feed his selfish, insatiable appetites. Were I not a gentleman, I could cite at least a half dozen whom he's wooed and abandoned without remorse. I will not have you counted among their number. I will not have you shamed in that manner. I forbid it!'

Lili listened quietly, her tight lipped anger easing slowly to a smile of understanding. So *that* was the real reason behind her brother's tirade. He was fearful, perhaps even jealous, at the thought of some other man sharing his sister's affections. No wonder he had blown an innocent invitation so far out of proportion, ascribed to it dark and devious motives by a man more than twice her age. How sweet. How truly noble. And yet, how inconvenient. But perhaps there was a way to mitigate these feelings.

'Tell me, Charles, would it ease your mind any were I to inform you, confidentially of course, that Victoria Sloane was quite interested to hear anything I might care to tell her about you?'

'Not in the least,' Charles grumbled. 'I have no interest

in anything a member of the Sloane family has to say.'

'But you don't know the lady, Charles. You are judging her without a shred of evidence. As a lawyer, you, of all people, should know better.'

'No doubt the lady is every bit the same as her father - headstrong, stubborn, cruel to the very core. 'Tis in the blood, Lili. There's no escaping it.'

'Oh ... I see,' Lili whispered, bristling with anger at the concept. 'If that is the way you feel, the way you truly feel, then I expect there is no basis for further discussion between us.'

For long moments Charles blinked vacantly. Then, suddenly realising what he had said, he reached out for Lili's elbow, trying to restrain a frightened bird from flight.

'Oh Lili, please ... I am so sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Do not go, I beg of you. There is no reason to be angry.'

'Isn't there?'

'I did not mean what I said,' he repeated, shamefaced, remorseful.

'Oh yes you did, Charles. But be that as it may, my mind is quite made up and I shall act upon it, with your approval, or without.'

Yanking free of his grasp, Lili turned on her heel, marched across the verandah and down the steps, eager to get away before Charles saw the tears welling in her eyes, the misery tugging at the corners of her mouth. He had not meant to wound her she realised, or to hurl an ugly truth into the soft vulnerable places of her pride. And yet he had, albeit unwittingly, revealed between them the inevitable, insurmountable barrier of their disparate backgrounds ... an implicit, irrefutable distance his whiteness must impose.

*Very well - so be it!* Lili growled within herself as she climbed into her carriage. It had been foolish of her to presume Charles's understanding, his support. Unrealistic that she expect from him advice for which there was no precedent. They were brother and sister, yet they

would always be as different as day from night. At the root of things he could know nothing of her anguish, could not begin to appreciate the torment of not being black, not being white, not being even something tangible in between.

There were no rules for this, Lili realised bitterly. Somehow she would have to find her own way, carve out the shape of her life piece by piece, step by step as she went along.

Alone.

## 2

Victoria slumped in her seat as the phaeton turned from the road between the stone gate posts of Oxford Hall, bringing her home, back to prison. Above her, lofty branches reverberated with bird song, and for miles in each direction flowing fields of young green cane undulated in the fragrant breeze. Yet she took no pleasure in this place, felt neither pride nor comfort at the sight of the stately house that stood at the top of the drive. How she loathed being here – and her father, for making her return!

At the sound of her carriage, half a dozen house maids rushed from the building, calling her name with bashful smiles in hopes of winning a moment's recognition from the new young mistress. Victoria ignored them. Eyes focused straight ahead, she snapped open her parasol and marched across the grass. She would acknowledge none of them she vowed. Except for the issuing of direct orders there would be no interchange between Victoria Sloane and the likes of these yaws bitten savages. A small, insignificant separation perhaps, yet satisfying nonethe-

less in that it kept her removed and inviolate, distinct from her surroundings. Never would she allow herself to become part of this place. Unlike her mother, Jamaica would not swallow *her* alive.

'Miss Victoria, a moment of yer time, please?'

The words, clearly different from the chaotic pitch and rhythm of Negro speech, stopped her halfway up the steps and turned her around. Victoria smiled, aware of a quickening in her breast at the sight of a young white man grinning bashfully, his sweat-stained shirt open to the waist and clinging damply to a smooth, hard muscled chest.

'Yes, what can I do for you?' she replied in a voice grown liquid with sensuality.

'The name is Billy Austin, Miss - y'r overseer here at Oxford Hall.' He shifted nervously from one foot to the other then looked downward, toying with the hat clutched in his hands. 'Just wanted t'make y'r acquaintance, t'welcome ya and let y'know that if you've need of a man's assistance, any assistance 'tall ...'

'Why thank you, Billy. How very considerate,' Victoria replied, enjoying his uneasiness, perceiving it as eager deference toward one of the supposedly weaker sex. It was ludicrous of course for him to presume that she'd have need of anything from the likes of such an artless bumpkin. And yet, the appeal of this eager young buck, no longer a boy but not quite yet a man, was not without its definite intrigue.

'Perhaps one evening when my trunks are empty and I've need for them to be removed to the cellar,' she continued, thrilled by a perceptible stiffening of his knees and shoulders, the sparkle of huge eyes grown brighter at her thinly veiled promise. 'That is, of course, if you are not too busy, or too tired, after your day's labours.'

'Oh no, Miss. 'Twould be my pleasure t'serve ya. And the evenin's fine, any evenin' y'wish.' The grin widened as he lifted a thick forearm to wipe aside an unruly tumble of sandy coloured curls.



*Dare she suggest that he come to her room this very night?*

'Victoria!'

The two stiffened, each tearing his gaze from the other.

'Best that I be goin' now, Miss,' Billy murmured with a hasty, fearful glance towards the house. 'Nice t'have y'r acquaintance.'

'Victoria, come here t'me this minute!'

She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. Still, she forced herself to wave languidly after the departing figure, stubbornly determined not to give her father the satisfaction of thinking he'd outwitted her. Gritting her teeth against the fury within her, Victoria counted slowly to ten then turned with a fixed, deliberate smile.

'Yes, Father, I hear you,' she sang out sweetly, making her way towards the top of the steps where Patrick stood breathing heavily, ruddy cheeks purple with rage, yellow-white hair askew, curling damply round his ears. Then, in a softer voice as she brushed past him, 'Indeed, the entire plantation can hear you!'

She did not give him time to reply but strode directly through the gallery, up the huge winding staircase, and into her room. Crossing to the dressing table, Victoria removed her hat before the looking glass, calculating how much time would pass before her father burst in upon her.

'Is it done?' he demanded, storming into the room, glaring at her reflection in the mirror.

'Yes, Father, I have arranged your little deception,' she answered, making no attempt to conceal her disdain. 'That foolish child is thrilled to her bones at the notion of supping with the venerable Patrick Sloane. Poor ninny, I expect you shall have her in your bed before the New Year.'

'Mind y'r tongue, Daughter,' Patrick growled, 'I'll not have ya foulin' this house with such filthy talk. Do y'know nothin' about behaviour suited to a lady?'

'And from who should I have learned such refinement, Father - yourself?' Victoria's lips were quivering with

fury. 'Easy for you to make your pretty speeches now, but where have you been for the last twenty-five years? When did I cross your mind before you needed me here to serve your own, selfish ends?'

'Ungrateful, impudent girl,' Patrick snapped, balling his fingers into fists. 'All them years of fancy schoolin', the finest clothes, the best accommodations. Where d'ya think the money came from, lass?'

'Please, Father, spare me your martyrdom. Let us not forget how convenient it was to keep me off in Europe, away from this place that you might live your life, unencumbered by the needs of a growing daughter. Don't you think I know what you've been doing? Don't you suppose I realise the true nature of your relationship with that black woman, your ... housekeeper?' She snorted derisively and lifted a brush to stroke her long, flowing hair. 'Thank goodness Mother isn't alive to see what's become of her dowry and inheritance.'

"Tis more a pity so much of that money was wasted upon the likes of y'rself,' Patrick grumbled. 'Well, y'r back now, and here is where you'll stay. Not so easy these days t'find the gold f'r spendin'. Funds 'r scarce, y'know. Times 'r hard.'

'But Lili Osborn will change that soon enough, won't she, Father? A young bride with an estate worth fifty thousand pounds at least should cure your troubles, wouldn't you say? Imagine, the idea of hoodwinking a woman less than half your age - a mere girl, for heaven's sake!'

Patrick's eyes narrowed; his voice became a throaty growl. 'And what about y'rself, Miss High 'n Mighty? Don't think I didn't see what was goin' on just now. Caught ya warmin' up t'young Austin, didn't I? A mere lad of nineteen I might add, as if ya didn't know.' His eyes sparkled with triumph.

'How clever you are, Father; such stealth and cunning,' Victoria replied coolly. 'To have unearthed an innocent exchange in broad daylight upon the front steps of your own house! Is there no end to your powers

of deduction?' She lifted slender fingers to her lips and yawned in an exaggerated gesture of boredom.

Patrick slammed the bedroom door. 'I'll not have this, young lady, I'm warnin' ya. There'll be none of that sort of thing goin' on at Oxford Hall. Y'may be sure of it.'

'Please, Father, 'tis hot enough without your little tempest.'

'Little tempest, eh?' He strode across the room and spun Victoria round. 'See here, lass, y'r not so grown that I can't still show ya the back o'me hand. I should think you'd be properly ashamed of y'rself after what you've done. Enough, at least, so as not to dishonour me any further with y'r sinful ways.'

'My sinful ways?' Victoria mocked. 'And what would you call the manner in which you live? Come now, your reputation must exceed even your own, overblown conception of a man's capabilities.'

'Different f'r a man,' Patrick mumbled. 'A lady is supposed t' ...'

'What, Father? What is a lady supposed to do? Languish in the heat like one of your coconut palms? Really, you are too absurd. Don't make me laugh.'

'You'll not be laughin' if I catch ya at yer old tricks, I can promise ya that! No daughter of mine is goin' t'act the harlot, and certainly not beneath me own roof.'

'Really, Father, you do exaggerate.'

'Do I, now? 'Twas no exaggeration, those accounts I heard of y'r escapades. And from more than one pair o' lips, I'll thank ya t'remember.'

'Your associates in London do have a way of ennobling their vicious slander, I must say. Time was when petty gossip was the province of women.'

'Twas no mere gossip that you were consortin' with a man.'

'A peer of the realm, I'll thank you to remember.'

'A married man, nevertheless.'

'With taste and style.'

'With a wife an' two little ones!'

'And the money to indulge us all.'

'A shameless philanderer.'

'With a house in Mayfair, and another in Bath ... and tenderness and sensibilities the likes of which, dear Father, would be lost upon you even in their explanation.' Victoria's hands flew suddenly to her face to hide the tears she no longer could restrain. 'And you destroyed him! - dragged his name through the gutters with the help of your factors and your friends.'

'Yes,' Patrick answered with relish. 'As I shall destroy anyone who opposes me, includin' the likes of y'rself, if necessary. Is that clear?'

She glared at him, shivering with hatred. 'And what have you left me to look forward to in this horrid place?' she railed. 'Entertaining *your* friends? Listening to endless outcries against emancipation of the slaves? There's not one single, eligible gentleman worth looking at for miles I'll warrant - except, perhaps, for Mister Rutland.'

'Here now, what's this!' Patrick snatched her wrists, forcing them aside, glaring with menace into her tear streaked face. 'What do you know of Charles Rutland?'

Victoria paused, recognising a weakness, suddenly eager to probe and discover the extent of this unexpected vulnerability. 'Only a few things from Lili Osborn, but all of them complimentary and well deserving further investigation.'

'Over my dead body!' Patrick bellowed, yanking Victoria up onto her feet. 'You'll have no truck with that one, d'ya hear? An abolitionist, 'e is - a traitor t'us all. Wants t'free them coloureds 'e does, an' see us all ruined.'

'I could think of lower aspirations,' Victoria flung back venomously.

Patrick's hand swung out and caught her squarely on the cheek. 'Don't ya ever ... *ever* speak t'me that way again,' he snarled. 'That's the last that I'll hear of anythin' connectin' y'rself an' Charles Rutland, d'ya understand? Do ya!'

'Very well - yes.' *Damn you!* Victoria whimpered, the last added inside her head as Patrick turned and stormed out of the room.

For a long time she stared dully at the door, numb with fear in the wake of the man's abusive violence. But then as she raised one hand to touch her throbbing cheek, Victoria's breathing deepened and her eyes came back to life, alight with sudden inspiration.

Her father was mistaken, she vowed. This was not the last he'd hear of Charles Rutland, or any other man for that matter.

It was only the beginning.

### 3

'Remember, I have consented to accompany you only out of concern for your welfare,' Charles grumbled as he drove the curricule through the front gates of Bonnaire. 'I feel it is my duty to protect you from him. For a woman of twenty-two you certainly have no understanding of men.'

Lili hid a mischievous grin under the brim of her huge new bonnet heaped with feathers, enjoying this drive through lengthening afternoon shadows and revelling in her visions of the festivities ahead. She clutched a gaily wrapped tin filled with Christmas cakes, the recipe for which had been given by Victoria Sloane, and titillated herself with thoughts of his reaction were Charles to discover the secrets she'd been collecting these last ten days.

Tiny ripples of excitement fluttered through her at the memory of half a dozen notes delivered between Oxford Hall and Bonnaire - exchanges of sentiment between herself and Patrick Sloane. Nothing improper of course,

yet growing decidedly in their content from mere cordiality to warmth as time went by. And the gifts: a basket of fruit, the delicate lace-edged handkerchief that had belonged to his wife; mere tokens of good fellowship and neighbourly affection to be sure, yet oddly, irrepressibly exciting to her after so many years of anonymity with the Osborn household.

Then, of course, there were those delightful visits with her wonderful friend, Victoria. A hint of colour darkened her cheeks as in her mind Lili relived clandestine meetings, savouring snatches of naughty, girlish confidences in which she had so happily indulged. Actually, it was Victoria who first had hit upon the notion of assuaging Charles's misgivings by bringing him along this day, never guessing their true nature, of course, but assuming his reluctance to be a natural outgrowth of political enmity between the two men of violently opposing points of view.

For her part, Lili was more than glad to play Cupid. Above and beyond the differences between herself and her brother she loved Charles dearly and knew he spent far too many hours hard at work, championing the cause of freedom for the slaves. Even now, glancing covertly in his direction, Lili could see little squint lines beginning to etch themselves around the corners of his eyes, and the tight set of his jaw - far too serious for such a young, attractive man. No doubt the attentions of Victoria Sloane were just the thing to neutralise that dour outlook grown upon him prematurely. Indeed, Lili assured herself, Charles's opinion notwithstanding, she certainly did possess her fair share of insight regarding the needs of men!

The thought brought another association to mind. 'I surely wish Aunt Emily were here,' Lili mused aloud.

'So do I!' Charles seconded vigorously. 'Aunt Emily would certainly find a way to make those pretty eyes see the sense of things. In situations such as this an older woman's influence and counsel are definite assets.'

Inside herself Lili giggled, confident that a woman

who'd declined half the noblemen of Paris in her time and married a sea captain instead, would certainly be first to encourage new and independent endeavours. After all, hadn't Emily supervised Allamanda Hall single-handedly for all those years that Charles was off in England? Such a person would never encourage others to take a passive view of life. Sincerely, Lili hoped her aunt and new Uncle Avery were enjoying their wedding trip in Europe and would return to Jamaica soon.

The flow of rumination was abruptly halted by sounds of merry commotion advancing upon the carriage from a place unseen, past a bend in the road. Charles pulled on the reins, slowing the horses to a walk just as the procession came into view. It was made up of a bevy of smiling faces; black, chocolate, olive, café au lait, and every gradation of colour possible in between those.

'Here now, what is this?' he cried, eyes narrowing with suspicion at the delicate sound of pipe and tabor.

'Tis the beginning of a Christmas procession en route to Falmouth,' Lili answered, smiling her encouragement towards a cluster of revellers appearing, suddenly, in rich silks and muslins, moving to the rhythm of a music band and bearing, above their shoulders, large, artificial trees stuck full with burning tapers. 'Look there, Charles,' she cried, pointing. 'Tis Richard the Third!'

As though to prove her right a man in a white mask with a great silver crown upon his head danced up beside the carriage crying, 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!'

'Isn't this the most exciting display?' Lili exclaimed. 'Let us give them some silver, Charles. Please, let's do.'

Charles nodded, reaching into a pocket of his frock coat, his eyes clouded over as though the sinking sun had cast a sudden shadow. 'This is not the celebration I remember,' he murmured darkly as he distributed coins among the upturned hands stretched eagerly in his direction. 'And what is that?' he demanded as twin columns of new-comers paraded into view, dressed pin for pin alike in sapphire blue with matching parasols of

exactly equal dimension raised above flamboyant toques, also of a singular design, tied around their heads.

'Why those are the Blue Set girls, of course, who will undoubtedly be followed soon by the Reds,' Lili replied, sitting up higher to wave beyond those crowded near the carriage towards this new group. 'See how they are dressed the same? Believe me, Charles, the splendour you see is a result of the most fierce and energetic competition between the Blues and the Reds. Look, here comes Britannia! And there, the Blue King and the Blue Queen!'

'Indeed, in a full British Admiral's uniform,' Charles replied sourly, observing a white satin sash, the huge cocked hat with a gilt paper crown on the top of it.

'Yes, isn't it lovely?' Lili cried, setting her tin upon the seat and standing for a clearer view of the next group coming round the bend; these, obviously, the Red Set girls, dressed all in scarlet, dancing arm in arm.

'But what has happened to the celebration I remember from my childhood?' Charles complained, turning from the colours of the British flag. 'Surely Lili, you recall those great, black fellows who marched with ox horns upon their heads and their wonderful masks that used to frighten us so? I can still see plainly the huge painted mouths with boar tusks protruding.' He crooked the index finger of each hand and placed them beside his lips, illustrating cherished recollections. 'And the swords, Lili! Remember the long wooden swords that each man brandished as he came up, dancing to the door ...'

'... bellowing "*John Connu! John Connu!*" with such great vehemence,' Lili completed the thought, swept up in her brother's enthusiasm. 'And the women, Charles,' she continued, her head thrown back with laughter. 'Do you recall the hordes of drunken women following after with aniseed-water, refreshing their warriors not half so well as themselves until everyone was quite besotted?'

'Yes, Lili. I certainly do. What has become of all that?' Lili fell silent, jarred painfully from happy reflections.



"'Tis changed now, and all but gone,' she whispered. Then, cheering again, 'But surely this is just as nice. Wouldn't you agree?'

'Is it?' Charles sighed, dropping back into the seat beside her, turning to Lili with a troubled expression. 'Don't you see it? Don't you recognise what has happened? This is merely imitation - a sorry parody of British ways adopted by these people in an effort to survive here. Look at that!' he cried sharply, pointing to the Set girls marching in pairs. 'See how they arrange themselves, black with black, brown with brown. 'Twas never thus before.'

'But they are Free People of Colour, Charles. Brown ladies and black women who choose to keep with their own kind.'

'Brown ladies? Black women? Their own kind, indeed! And which are those?' he challenged, pointing to others, hangers-on moving at the periphery, dancing along, yet holding back a distance from the rest.

'They are slaves, of course.'

'Yes! Slaves! Yet Negroes too, as surely as the rest. But will they mingle? Do they acknowledge themselves or each other through the unity of fellowship, the integrity of custom? Look at the costumes, Lili. Observe these representations. John Connu was an African chief, for heaven's sake. But what have we here today? A Blue King and Queen; the spirit of Britannia; Richard the Third. Tell me, please, what has this got to do with them, really? What has become of their own traditions, their own heritage? Free People of Colour? Free, indeed!' he cried, grabbing up the horses' reins. 'Come, Lili, let us go. I cannot bear to look upon such travesty a moment longer. It saddens me too much to dwell on what has happened in Jamaica.'

With that he flicked the reins and set the horses into motion while Lili, pressed into the corner of her seat, remained glum, guilty, deeply disturbed by all he had said; every word unmistakably, undeniably true.

*Free People of Colour, indeed!* The words continued

to ring painfully in her ears. For as she turned her head to gaze after the departing parade, Lili knew that there but for the most unusual circumstances might she, herself, be marching.

A fiery ball that had been the sun lay smouldering, hidden now but for an angry sliver behind tall mountains that cast the Great House at Oxford Hall into deep, purple shadow. As the curricule rolled along the drive Lili tried to direct her attention toward the sparkle of chandeliers behind tall windows, the merry lilt of fiddle music and happy voices drifting outward on the evening breeze. And yet, even as she approached the celebration to which she'd so looked forward, she could not help but feel uneasiness within herself, nagging doubts that lingered in the aftermath of her brother's observations.

'Miss Osborn ... Welcome!'

Lili looked up, about to respond in kind when the smile of greeting she'd intended froze, half formed across her face, arrested by the sight of Patrick Sloane's own expression transmuted from joy to anger and surprise.

'Well, well - what've we here?' he called, ambling diagonally down the steps. 'Charles Rutland, 'less these eyes are deceivin' me. An' t'what do I owe this honour? Sure now, 'tis a Christmas miracle!' The brogue was thick with sarcasm, rippling with resentment.

Lili sensed her brother stiffening, but before she could think of any means to prevent a confrontation, the contest was already underway.

'Hardly that, Sir,' Charles replied icily. 'If arguments in the Assembly of late are any indication of the stance our legislature is going to maintain, I suspect there's little chance of a miracle occurring in Jamaica - certainly none which could be remotely compared with the Christmas spirit or the precepts of Christianity.'

'Now see here, lad ...' Patrick bristled, glaring murderously. 'Here y'are back upon this island less than a year an' already ya presume t'alter a system that's served

us grandly f'r decades. Need I remind ya that I've sat in the House nearly twenty years developin' me talent f'r framin' laws best suited to the interests of this colony?'

Charles faced him squarely, clearly unintimidated. 'And need I remind *you* that the very Assembly in which you are admittedly something of an institution has failed miserably for the past twenty years to come to grips with the progress of this century! Despite your resistance and the nearsighted misgivings of other planters like yourself, the time for improving the lot of our dark brothers is upon us. This year ... next year ... there can be no avoiding the responsibility we bear. England will not have it so.'

'England be hanged!' Patrick raged. 'Tis nothin' less than madness they propose in London. These so-called reform programmes y'r Colonial Office would impose are sure t'undermine the very foundations of West Indian economy. Let Sir Thomas Buxton and his comrades in Parliament destroy their own property, I say, and leave mine be!'

'And therein lies the basic fallacy in your thinking, and the thinking of your friends, Mister Sloane. Won't you see it?' Charles pleaded, gripping the man's elbow, turning Patrick back towards the house. 'No human being can rightly be the property of another. The slaves must be raised to a position of self-sustaining members of society, men and women with legal redress against the unlimited powers of others. Let us elevate the Negroes to a level of civilisation where they can lead decent lives, free of punitive laws that fail to recognise and develop moral fibre. Give them some definitive, non-servile status, I say; equivalent, if you will, to the English labourer.'

'But indeed they *are* property, and property they must remain,' Patrick insisted, reaching the top of the steps. 'Instruments of production, as God well meant f'r them t'be!'

'Come now, let us not invite God into this through one door while we shut another in His face,' Charles shot

back as they entered the house. "Tis your own precious Assembly that has failed to implement England's suggestion that missionaries be allowed to work among the slaves on Jamaican estates. Where is God in these considerations? How does such intolerance purport to serve Him?"

"Tis blasphemy that you'd even mention Our Lord and slaves in the same breath," Patrick exploded above the fiddle music and conversation in the gallery. "The teachin's of missionaries cannot apply t'African heathens, an' them what say differently are the troublemakers t'be sure. 'Tis the dissenters - the Methodists, the Baptists, *especially* the Baptists - who would stir unrest among the coloureds. An' were that not mischief enough, they send back falsified reports t'England, makin' us the object of unusual an' unfair scrutiny by the Colonial Office, whereupon, time and again, Jamaican law is disallowed by the Privy Council. And on whose behalf, Sir? The Africans! The abolitionists! Our enemies, with whom the bloody missionaries are in league!"

"Have you never heard of brotherly love?" Charles asked softly, pointedly.

"Between black and white? Free man and slave? What kind of talk is this?" Patrick accused. "Y'r sentiments smack of equality, an' I don't mind tellin' ya, Sir, even the suggestion of that unnatural condition offends me very soul. 'Tis sure I'm not alone in sayin' there will be no buildin' of chapels, or religious instruction f'r the slaves on my property. I will not have it!"

"Then you will have rebellion and bloodshed. Need I remind you of recent events in your own country?"

"There, that is what I mean!" Patrick shouted, yanking free from Charles and moving towards the centre of the gallery, oblivious to others listening to their argument. "You, yourself are provin' me very own fears t'be well founded. With Parliament on the side of the black man 'tis small wonder that slaves can justify their violence. We here have not forgotten the lesson of St. Domingo; a

perfect example of how white men die when slaves are given rights.'

'No, Sir - when slaves are *not* given rights,' Charles contradicted sharply. 'Your own Society of West Indian Planters and Merchants agrees that change must be enacted in Jamaica. And at the risk of seeming to contradict my own beliefs, I would remind you that your very own desire, the survival of your horrid institution of slavery, is best served also in the recognition and reform of its worst features. If the Jamaican Assembly will not co-operate with England's efforts toward the improvement of slave conditions, public opinion is undoubtedly going to drive the British government to decided acts of interference.'

'Traitor! Abolitionist!' Patrick screamed.

'No to the first, but yes, assuredly yes to the second,' Charles replied calmly, seizing this moment of Patrick's discomposure to have the final word, to publicly out-do the man who would have humiliated him. 'Indeed, I proudly admit to being a member of the Society For the Mitigation and Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions.' Defiantly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a pamphlet. ' "*An Appeal To The Justice, Religion and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on Behalf of the Negro Slaves In The British West Indies*"', by your friend, Mister Wilberforce!' Charles cried, waving the paper in front of Patrick's purple face. 'You'll do well to study this, Sir, and reconsider your position.'

'Never!' Patrick shouted, snatching the paper and ripping it to bits. 'If this is what you read in England then I say to you, go back there! Live with others like yourself! There is no place for such dangerous sentiment in Jamaica!'

'Father! Please! 'Tis Christmas Day!' Victoria swept across the gallery towards the two men. 'Gentlemen, I beg of you, postpone these arguments for Spanish Town where they more properly belong. Certainly you'll have fair opportunity to air your views when next the

Assembly is convened. For now, 'tis a holiday, and surely the milder spirit of the season is more in keeping with the purpose of our gathering.' With that she looped her arm through Charles's and drew him away into the throng.

Patrick came upon Lili, standing near the front door, rooted to the spot where she had watched in helpless horror as the recent interchange grew rapidly towards narrowly escaped disaster.

'Beggin' y'r pardon, Miss. I shouldn't've allowed it t'go on so. 'Tis a pity this had t'happen, an' especially tonight.'

'No, no - you needn't apologise,' Lili replied. 'It was stupid of me to invite Charles. I'd only intended for him to be ...' She stopped, unable to tell the truth, too flustered to invent a lie.

'An escort. Of course. 'Tis only reasonable that a lady have protection along the roads, especially in times such as these,' Patrick finished for her, obviously comforted by his own explanation.

'But your lovely party is spoiled, and that is my fault.'

'Not at all, dear lady. Not at all! No one will remember this in half an hour's time. But look at you - y're tremblin'! Surely y'can't have taken that youngster's foolish prattlin' t'heart.'

Lili smiled tightly, evasively, unwilling to reveal the true reason for the quivering in her limbs. Poignantly, painfully, she'd realised that in part, in large part, it was herself Charles and the abolitionists were defending: Africans, sons of Africans however far removed from the original Guineamen who'd first set foot upon Jamaican shores: people who would remain forever imperiled were the laws not changed.

'Might I offer ya a drink, perhaps, and a quiet place t'sit until you've had a chance t'calm y'rself?'

'Why yes, I'd like that,' Lili murmured absently, barely able to concentrate on the social amenities as Patrick guided her around the perimeter of the gallery towards the library door on the far side. She could not hide from her feelings now, would not, even if she'd had

the choice. She had a stake in this, a very personal and immediate involvement with the direction events were going to take upon this island.

But perhaps she might speak with Patrick herself, she realised suddenly. Perhaps a woman's touch might gently, yet effectively bring him round to an altered way of thinking. In any event, Lili knew that she must try.

'But we are now speaking of the Free Persons of Colour,' Lili continued, allowing Patrick to refill her glass a second time and return the goblet into her hand.

'There's no difference, I'm tellin' ya,' he replied. 'All niggers are the same.'

'Well yes, I suppose one could look at it that way. But we are speaking of a quite specific segment of that race, are we not?' she pressed, despite the agony of a double-edged sword cutting through her spirit: one blade the fact of discrimination; the other, Lili's awareness of her own participation in it by pretending to be white. 'I can understand your fear of freeing slaves, losing the people who work your fields. But what of the petitions by the Free People of Colour requesting the extension of greater privileges to those of their number? Certainly there is little danger in abolishing the civil and political disabilities under which so vast and opulent a class of freemen labours. What harm can come of permitting them representation on juries, or allowing the vote to people proven worthy of our trust and clearly loyal to the Crown?'

Patrick leaned back beside her on the settee, a long exhalation of breath underscoring a patient smile worn thin about the edges. 'My dear Lili, I am sure 'tis only the innocence of tender years that causes ya t'speak this way. Believe it, I am all f'r reasonable progress upon this island, yet I know whereof I'm speakin' when I tell ya it is best that Free Coloureds - indeed, *all* coloureds - be kept in their place for the general good. Such sentiment is an essential part of the Constitution of Jamaica and has been upheld by laws wisely shaped t'the very

purpose; t'preserve the sacred distinction between white people and Free Coloureds and slaves. Besides,' he added airily, 'they labour under no civil disability whatever. Like the Hebrews, they have merely been excluded from power. Y' must realise, dear lady, that given the mongrel breedin' that's produced this class o' people, their morality must likewise be corrupt.'

Lili felt her stomach tighten, her conscience, her pride crying out against such flagrant injustice. 'But in many cases they are offspring of men of high station. Men such as yourself, Mister Sloane,' she added pointedly. 'Yet you withhold from them the rights to which each British subject, however humble, is entitled.'

'They are coloureds, and therefore they are scoundrels!' Patrick cried, setting his glass down. 'Perhaps ya do not know that even as we speak there are Free Coloureds threatenin' to withhold their services in the militia durin' martial law! I assure ya, Lili, any further concessions to these people will be highly prejudicial to the white inhabitants of the island, wildly dangerous, an' surely productive of greater mischief. But come - enough o' this talk,' he said, changing course, a smile creeping back across his face. 'Certainly there are other, more agreeable topics to discuss.' He reached to take her hand.

Lili gazed downward, trying to conceal the frustration smouldering within her, aware suddenly of another discomfort rising quickly in her mind. To be here, alone like this with Patrick Sloane, was not without particular overtones and implications - implications that stirred, deep inside her, a whirlwind of conflicting emotion. On one hand she was thrilled by the interest and attention of so important a personage, but on the other the very essence of her being, the dichotomy from which she had been spawned was afire with fearful protest, reminding her, screaming in outrage that this man was a born enemy, a *buckra* who would destroy the people she loved without a second thought, and herself as well, if he ever learned the truth about her.

'There now, are ya always so serious?' Patrick's voice



came gently through the tempest of her contemplations. 'Better y'be thinkin' things that Nature intended to occupy the mind of a lovely young lass.'

Lili blushed and set her goblet on the table. 'You flatter me, Mister Sloane. I am not accustomed to such compliments.'

'Come now, there's no need f'r modesty with me,' Patrick coaxed, taking her other hand and placing both between his palms. 'I am not a young man, Lili, but not so old I do not recognise great beauty. Surely y'must be told, day in and day out?'

'No, Sir,' Lili confessed, smiling shyly. 'I admit that I am greatly inexperienced in these matters. Grandmother was most indefatigable in her protection of me.'

'Oh yes. Vivian Osborn. I knew her well. A fine woman,' Patrick nodded solemnly. 'Terrible shame that she was taken from us so quickly, an' right in front of yer own eyes, too! But then, look what she leaves behind,' he continued, gazing warmly at Lili. 'A lovely lass - graceful, charming. Surely you'll do her proud, Lili. No doubt you'll marry soon and raise fine sons to carry on the great traditions of Bonnaire, to ensure the security of the land your grandmother so dearly loved.'

*And would have had me murdered for!* Lili thought, swallowing hard. 'I doubt that I shall marry, Sir, and certainly not within the foreseeable future.'

'But Lili, how can you say such a thing? Surely, there are many suitors?'

'No, Sir, not even one,' she confessed.

'And what of ... Charles Rutland?' The words came stiffly, tentatively.

Lili smiled through her discomfort. 'We are good friends, Charles and I, but nothing more. She looked away from Patrick, fearing he might find the truth in her eyes.

'I certainly won't say I am sorry for that,' he replied, grinning broadly. 'The fact is, dear lady, I was hopin' that perhaps you and I ...'

'Mister Sloane - you jest, surely.'

'No, hear me out, please. Up until this moment I, myself, would have thought it presumptuous to consider any liaison between us. But don't ya see it, Lili? - we are really two of a kind. Despite the difference in our ages, our circumstances are alike. I, a widower, pinin' alone these many years for me dear, departed wife. Yerself, alone as well, strugglin' bravely t'work the plantation y'r family's given ya. Don't ya see it? We are, the both of us, fightin' f'r our safety, strivin' f'r security upon this island. And yet, even as we devote ourselves to such necessary work, we each suffer the void caused by the absence of a mate, an emptiness that only love can fill.'

'Please, Sir, 'tis you now who speaks immodestly,' Lili replied, shocked by this effusive outpouring. 'Surely there are many ladies who admire you greatly. Indeed, a man of your stature and importance must command the attention of half the island's female populace.' She looked at him directly now, remembering all that Charles had told her.

'Ya flatter me, Lili - an' yes, I will admit there are some who think me pertinent to their designs. But not a one among them, I promise ya, has any notion where the heart o' this man lies. Not a one is possessed with tenderness and sincerity that devotion to duty and - yes, even in one so young as y'rself - only deep, personal loss can produce.' He slid his fingers along her arms to the elbows, drawing Lili closer towards him as he spoke.

'Please, dear lady, do not dismiss what I am sayin' without at least the rightful consideration these words deserve. Does a man's love have no merit simply 'cause he's passed his prime? D'ya think there is no yearnin' left beyond the age of twenty-five? Please, Lili, consider all we could have together. Think o' the comfort, the understandin', the experience I've got t'share that no young man could even hope t'offer.'

So overwhelmed was she by the ardour of this plea that Lili did not think to resist as Patrick drew her closer and closer, until their faces were barely inches apart. 'Say you'll give me a chance,' she heard him whisper. 'Tell me

that you'll not be stopped by foolish convention - that in such an important decision you'll let y'r good sense be y'r guide.' And then his arms were around her, his lips searching out her own.

'So! This is how you treat your guest of honour!' Charles bellowed as the library door swung open, banging against the wall.

Lili tried to speak to tell him things were not as they appeared, but it was too late. In a blur of motion she saw Charles rush across the chamber, lunge for Patrick, yank him up onto his feet by the collar, then strike him once, twice, and again until he fell back, groaning, upon the settee. 'Scoundrell!' Charles shouted, diving for the man anew, murder gleaming in his eyes.

With surprising agility Patrick twisted to the side, narrowly escaping his attacker. Charles crashed into the upholstery full force, his momentum tipping the settee backward, spilling both men head-first onto the floor. Struggling violently, banging against the leg of a table, knocking it over, they fought their way back onto their feet - grunting, gasping, pounding mercilessly at flesh and bone.

Charles found an opening into which he thrust his fist, connecting sharply with Patrick's jaw. With a shrill cry of pain, Patrick stumbled backward. Lili saw it coming. She cried out, calling Charles's name, begging him to hear her, but to no avail. With heart stopping clarity she watched him pummel Patrick into a tall, glass fronted bookcase. The huge piece of furniture teetered dangerously and came crashing down, showering books and debris in all directions.

'Dear God, they'll kill each other!' a voice cried from the doorway.

Lili turned to see a tumble of bodies pouring into the room. Quickly, she moved with the others towards the two men struggling to extricate themselves from underneath an avalanche of books, shattered figurines and broken glass. Breathless with fright, she fought her way to Charles who, like his opponent, was now

restrained by hands gripped tightly round his arms and legs.

'Mister Rutland! Father! Good heavens!' Victoria's voice rose shrilly as she rushed to Patrick, glaring angrily. 'Look at you - a grown man - brawling like some drunkard in a tavern! What manner of conduct is this for a public official? You've gained nothing from it, and you've settled nothing!'

Patrick's gaze searched wildly through the crowd, seeking out the eyes of comrades, begging their support and confidence, only to be met with quick evasion and awkward, deadly silence. 'Yes . . . I suppose yer right in that,' he rasped with a sardonic half-smile, shrugging loose the hands upon his coat, reaching into a torn pocket for a handkerchief to wipe the bloodied corner of his mouth. 'But the matter will be settled t'be sure!' he barked defiantly, whirling to glower at Charles. 'In the mornin' Sir - with pistols!'

#### 4

Slumped across her writing table, chin upon her forearm, Lili gazed past open shutters towards the dark hills silhouetted in the distance. Her eyes burned. Her legs throbbed from hours of pacing. Yet she could not even consider the possibility of sleep. It would be light in another hour, and soon thereafter Charles might draw his final breath.

She turned from the window and stood, toppling the chair with the suddenness of her motion. Drained and exhausted, she thrust her fingers deep into her hair, clutching fistfuls of silken black, shutting her eyes against the agony of awareness. But there was no hiding from it.

This was her fault, her own horrid doing. If Charles died she would have to bear the responsibility and guilt of it for the rest of her days.

*No ... not again. Not again!*

Lili heard the wail of her own misery reverberating through her head. Unbidden, inescapable, the vision of another day returned to torture her anew. As clearly as if it had happened yesterday she felt the cold metal of a gun against her palm, the sensation of sharp fingernails gouging her flesh, yanking at her hair as she tumbled in mortal combat with a madwoman who meant to murder her. And then the shock of the pistol exploding between them. The horrible sensation of the woman's body stiffening, falling back upon the bed - silent, lifeless. Caroline Rutland - Charles's mother - killed by the weapon smouldering in Lili's fingers.

Shivering, revolted, Lili flung herself upon the daybed, burying her face in velvet pillows, trying uselessly to hide from memories that would haunt her to her dying day. But there was no escape, no refuge from the vision of that ghastly spectacle, or another which was soon to follow.

For the thousandth time she saw herself that day in the bedroom at Allamanda Hall, standing dumbfounded above the lifeless body of Caroline Rutland and then, as another equally horrible awareness came upon her, turning slowly towards Vivian Osborn - the one who'd pretended to be her grandmother - that daughter of Satan who had planned to have her murdered and had led her to this ambush.

Lili had not meant to kill the woman. She knew that she would never be able to fire the gun even as she stood with the muzzle pointed in Vivian's direction. But Vivian did not know this; she could not possibly understand that there was someone incapable of violence, no matter what the cost or risk to property and inheritance. And so the woman's evil heart had burst, killing her without a bullet being fired, causing her to

drop to the floor, eyes wide with terror as though, even in death, the threats of her lifetime persisted.

Lili had run, flown from the presence of death towards the only promise of life she knew - to Charles Rutland, the man she'd loved, the man who'd asked her to marry him before the truth of their kinship had come to light. And he had understood. He had forgiven her - and, as always, helped her, creating with his brilliant mind the perfectly feasible tale of his mother's madness driving her to suicide and Vivian walking in upon the act, succumbing to a weakened heart from the shock of it.

The fabrication had protected Lili, saved her from shame and public scandal. Yet she would still have flown, hurried aboard the first ship and gone somewhere, anywhere, to escape the horror of her past.

But Charles would not have it so. He'd prevailed upon her to remain in Jamaica, close to him, where he could continue to love her, as a sister now, yet no less strongly than before. And when she'd resisted - certain that no man alive could be possessed of such magnanimity, convinced it was pity that bound him to her side - Charles had proved the depth of his devotion by purchasing Bonnaire from Vivian's son and daughter-in-law, Peter and Sarah Osborn, then secretly, efficiently, transferring the papers of ownership into Lili's name as though Vivian, herself, had made this bequest to her granddaughter.

Yes, it was Charles, wonderful Charles, who had saved her, protected her, and ensured her survival by providing her with the means for financial independence. And how had she rewarded him? By placing his life in jeopardy!

The fusion of past and present exploded into sudden physical energy, propelling Lili towards the huge armoire that stood against the wall. With frantic haste she reached inside and grabbed the first costume that came into her hand. Only one thought was in her mind as she fastened on the yellow gown and thrust her feet into morocco slippers: she had to get to Charles and

reason with him - she had to do whatever was necessary to keep him from that duel.

*No matter what it took she must not let there be another killing!*

She raced from the chamber, her feet barely touching the ground as she flew down the staircase, across the morning room, through the back door. Outside, the air was alive with night sounds: cicadas chirping in the foliage, parrots screeching, flying through the branches. Squinting in the dimness, Lili raced along the verandah and down the back steps, oblivious to the clicking of heels over wood, the rasp and wheeze of her breathing as she ran through the wet grass, past the kitchen wing behind the main building, heading towards the stables and her mare, Lady.

They moved as one, mare and maiden committed to a single purpose, leaning into the rhythm of hooves striking earth as they sailed through pastures and cane fields, racing towards Allamanda Hall. Shadows in the light of dawn, they leaped rushing streams and sailed over grey stone walls, following a straight line, a direct course that avoided time consuming twists and turns along the road.

At last the house loomed up ahead of them. Clutching Lady's neck, Lili jumped the wooden fence and galloped to the front door, calling out her brother's name.

A candle appeared in a downstairs window and a pair of eyes peered suspiciously behind the louvres.

'Missy Lili?' The houseboy, Cambridge, manager her name despite a growing yawn.

'I've come to see Mister Rutland,' Lili announced, ignoring his curious expression. 'Please tell him that I am here.'

'Massa Charles not dere, Missy,' Cambridge said. 'Him gone, now.'

'Gone? Where has he gone, for heaven's sake?'

The boy hesitated, wrestling mixed loyalties.

'For the love of God, Cambridge, where is that duel going to take place?' Lili screamed.

'Him gone to de ol' fort, Missy,' Cambridge replied. 'Fore de light come, Massa Charles all dress an' ...'

Lili did not hear the rest. Before the boy could finish she'd swung Lady's head around and was galloping downhill, racing towards the road that stretched along the water.

It seemed as though the entire parish had turned out to witness this morning's spectacle. They stood three deep in the shadows of a Spanish ruin, framed in rocky archways, climbing over rotting walls and crumbling turrets to find a clearer view.

Pushing, shoving, not caring how it seemed, Lili fought to make her way through the wall of bodies that faced the old parade. But she could not pierce the impenetrable barrier of men intent on witnessing a murder.

Quaking with terror, she turned and worked her way back out into the open. Flinging herself forward, she ran behind the line of spectators, stumbling over rough ground strewn with fallen rocks and chunks of mortar until she reached the base of an old gun platform at the far end of the ruins. Mindless of the danger, she scrambled up the ramp of the decaying bastion, fighting her way higher along the rocky ledge until at last she could see above the heads of the others.

Sudden, unearthly silence fell upon the crowd, confirming the worst of Lili's fears as she gazed out towards the clearing. The duel had already begun.

At the centre of the old parade two men stood back to back, pistols raised chest high, pointing skyward. Mute with horror, Lili heard the count, saw the men begin their pace off, while the whirlwind of her thoughts pummeled her towards madness.

*One ... two ... three ...*

There was no way to stop this! But how could she live



to see it through - how could she bear it?

*Ten ... eleven ... twelve ...*

Even if she screamed, they were too far away, would not hear.

*Thirteen ... fourteen ... fifteen ...*

He must not fall, must not die, must not forfeit his life on her account.

*Sixteen ... seventeen ... eighteen ...*

But which of them was her brother? At this distance, she could not be sure.

*Nineteen ... twenty!*

'Charles!'

His name burst from her lips as two shots rang out through the morning stillness. Then, she heard the crowd explode as one of the men gestured wildly, flinging his pistol through the air, stumbling, staggering, reeling backward as he clutched his face, then falling with an agonised scream that knifed straight through to Lili's heart.

It was the sound of her own screaming that she heard inside her head as Lili raced across the clearing, elbowing her way through the others moving quickly in the same direction to see which man survived, which one had been struck down. Suddenly she stopped, a mixture of relief and horror spinning through her as she recognised the figure lying on the rocky ground. With great, wrenching sobs Lili turned from the awful sight, searching for Charles, spotting him at last, then flinging herself across the distance between them until she rested, safe in his arms at last.

'Lili ... dear girl ... what are you doing here?' he rasped, breathing heavily, his body trembling with tension.

'Charles, I was so frightened and so worried for you!'

'So it would appear,' he answered, managing a feeble smile, attempting to make light of this for Lili's benefit.

'Charles, do you think you've ... killed him?' she whispered, barely able to voice the words.

'I suppose we ought to go and see,' he replied stiffly.

Lili took his arm, determined to support him, to stand by her brother no matter what came next. But when he led her to the centre of the crowd she stopped in horror at the sight of Patrick Sloane, flat on his back, his face disfigured by a deep wound gaping open from lip to ear.

'Patrick! ... Mister Sloane!' she screamed.

At the sound of her voice Patrick fought his way up to his feet, staggering dangerously.

Lili fought to keep from fainting at the sight of blood upon his face. His eyes were wild with pain and loathing and were fixed unmercifully upon her.

'Do not fear f'r me, but f'r yerselves - the both of ya!' Patrick shrieked, his voice a shrill whine of hysteria. Then, glaring right at Lili, 'Tis y'r fault this happened. Y'r the one responsible, sure as if y'd pulled the trigger!'

Others tried to soothe him and guide him off, but Patrick would not be appeased. 'You mark me words,' he shouted, 'you'll regret this, Lili Osborn. You'll pay f'r what you've done if it takes the rest o' me life!'

Then he fell back, senseless, into the cradle of arms surrounding him.

## 5

Two bells rang out. It was five o'clock in the morning on New Year's Day, 1824.

Tacooma stirred, sighed drowsily, then pressed his cheek back in among the folds of the hammock, lulled by the gentle rolling motion of the ship, the caress of a warm breeze whispering along the bare skin of his arms and shoulders. Closing his eyes more tightly against the rising light of day, he drew his knees up to his chest and aimed his being towards the deeper realms of sleep, only minimally aware of the snap and shiver of sails, the high pitched cries of birds wheeling overhead.

### *Birds!*

He was instantly awake, jumping to a sitting position with a burst of energy that upset the balance of the hammock and sent him tumbling to the wooden planks below.

'Land ahead! ... *Land ahead!*'

The jubilant cry aloft was echoed from the prow, amidships and back across the quarter deck, filling the morning air and Tacooma's heart with the thrill of success, the exultation of fulfilment.

Breathing rapidly, he bounded to his feet and raced forward, leaping over sleeping sailors and mounds of cargo spread across his path. With a joyful cry he hopped up on the fife-rail, wrapped his arms around the mainmast and began a rapid ascent, climbing with the confidence and stamina of a man half his age, shimmying upward exactly as he'd done a thousand times before along the trunks of tall coconut palms until, at last, he cleared the topsail and hooked his leg across a spar.

Tears of happiness clouded his vision as Tacooma strained to see through hazy sunbeams, filling in with recollection details of the island still miles away in the distance. United in their yearning, his senses served up memories gathered through five decades of his lifetime. He saw a panorama of leaves and flowers, hills and valleys, tightly woven jungles where waterfalls cascaded and vast, open fields. He recollected the great houses, slave huts and stark, stone buildings where the cane juice bubbled in copper boiling pots. All of these memories arose from, and were inexorably connected with, Bonnaire - the place where he'd been raised, the great plantation that had been his pain, his pleasure, the dominating force of his past, present, and as his heart had known since he'd departed, the inevitable link with his future. Filled with thoughts of then and now, Tacooma hugged the mast, slid his leg from the yard and began an eager descent to the deck below.

By now passengers and crew alike stood pressed

against the railing. Cheers and whistles marked the end of six weeks' journey, echoing Tacooma's own fervour, urging him even faster through the cabin house door, along the companionway and into the depths of the forecastle where his few belongings had been stowed.

Alone in the belly of the ship, he stripped off his trousers. Naked on his knees, Tacooma stretched his arms into a shadowy nook among the bow timbers and withdrew a battered leather portmanteau worn at the corners and tied with string. Humming to himself, he spread the pouch wide open and began to arrange his treasures in careful order before him. This done, he reached to the very bottom of the bag, lifted out an object and slowly peeled away the layers of cloth in which it had been wrapped. Careful to avoid the menace of jagged edges, he propped the piece of broken mirror against a sea chest where it would catch the dusty shafts of light poking in through the open hatch. Eagerly then, he began to daub boot black into puffs of grey along his temples and above his forehead - a little trick he'd learned at the barber's shop on Threadneedle Street where he'd shaved the heads and dressed the wigs of gentlemen.

It was a different, dapper figure who reappeared on deck a while later dressed in white shirt and cravat, a brown cloth coat cut away with tails above nankeen trousers, and a tall black top hat tilted at a rakish angle over one eyebrow. Tacooma stepped halfway through the cabin door, peeked shyly left and right, then brought from behind his back the hand in which he carried a brand new pair of buckled shoes. Whistling a tune unwittingly borrowed from the oystermongers in the streets of London he sauntered across the foredeck with a jaunty step, relishing the feel of wood against his bare feet. Later, when he'd reached Bonnaire would be time enough to put on shoes, he reasoned, for no matter how he'd tried, encasing toes in leather was a singular inhumanity Tacooma had not learned to abide.

It seemed to take forever until a pilot ship came out to guide them into Close Harbour. Tacooma stood in the shadow of the foresail, squinting shoreward as the frigate slipped neatly through a channel in the reef and nearer to the hubbub of Montego Bay. By now the town lay steaming in the forenoon sun. Tacooma could see clearly from the customs house beside the quay, along the streets lined with open shops that fronted onto wooden porches, all the way up into the surrounding hills where little houses nestled at a cooler elevation, their lofty perches shaded and perfumed with boughs of bougainvillea and flowering hibiscus.

Distracted by the imposition of a painful memory, Tacooma swung his gaze westward along the shoreline, eyes narrowing then holding fast to the sight of a long wharf stretched far out among the gleaming wavelets. Fists clenched, breathing deeply, he stared at the place where a smaller ship now lay at anchor, a cutter taking puncheons of rum into her hold. Had it been twenty years since that night? He could hardly believe it as he continued to stare, remembering how he'd swum from shore to climb aboard the *Hannibal-Frigate*, a slaver filled with Guineamen - Whiddahs and Ashanti, like himself - whom he'd freed before they could be sold into bondage.

Suddenly, it was important that he be first aboard the tender, first to step ashore. Tacooma ran to the gangway, watching impatiently as the anchor line was lowered and the first little boat manoeuvred carefully alongside the hull. At last the barrier swung open and he climbed downward, pausing just a moment to roll his trousers up below the knees before he dropped into the tiny, bobbing vessel.

Finally the oars were moving, slicing through the ripples, pulling the boat smoothly to the wharf. Tacooma was up and out in an instant, leaping ashore and digging his toes into the soil of Jamaica: the place where he'd escaped a slave and was finally returning, a free man.

*A free man!*

The thought took his breath away and sent cold shivers along his spine. Suppressing the urge to shout his joy, Tacooma drew himself up to his full six feet, puffed his chest out proudly and strode through the crowd of hagglers gathering at the dock.

Everything was just as he remembered it: the noise, the smells, the whirlwind of activity along the sandy streets, the groan of carriage supports, the crack of whips, the angry drivers shouting uselessly, fighting to get through.

And there was something else he noticed - Negroes like himself dressed not in slave's clothing but in fine, costly attire to rival the costume of any *buckra* he had ever seen. Men in fancy waistcoats and breeches buttoned at the knee, women in silks and muslins with lacy parasols and huge, opulent bonnets - black, brown, mulatto, parading smartly, fearlessly, in and out of the shops. Free Coloureds.

*Free Coloureds!*

He could hardly bear the thrill of it. This was just as they had promised it would be in London! At last, it seemed the law from the king had reached across the water, which meant the whip was gone, slaves were no longer to be sold away from their families, and the purchase of their freedom had been made easier. Now there would be ample time allowed for these people to work their own provision grounds and guardians could be appointed to act for them in legal matters.

The wonder of it filled Tacooma with enormous energy, quickening his step as he moved further from the wharves. From time to time he gazed into the crowd half-hoping for the face of someone that he knew - Missy Emily, Mister Avery, Massa Charles, perhaps even Juba-Lili. But of course they were not here. Why should they be? No one knew that he was coming back.

No, that wasn't so, he corrected himself. Auntie Fushabah would know he could not stay away forever, that he must return to the land of his childhood where he'd risked his life so many times to lead his people

towards freedom. This was where his heart was, and his spirit, attached to the land as surely as his ancestors who lay beneath it - his parents Baddu and Figaro, Auntie Mimba, Cousin Luida and her little Jemmy-boy - all of them dead now because of the *buckras*, returned into the arms of *Nyankupon*, yet alive and as real within Tacooma as if they walked beside him still, which, indeed, he often felt they did.

He continued briskly past the eastern-most edge of the town and onto the dusty road that trailed beside the sea. As he made his way through the blinding glare, Tacooma did not mind the heat or even walking seven miles to reach his destination. No longer need he slip fearfully through forests, or shuffle along the side of the road with downcast eyes, prepared at any moment to whip his hat off in deference to passing *buckras*. Today he walked along the centre of the path, proudly, right out in the open - alive, visible, as he had learned he could be from the first moment he'd set foot in Britain. Here, at last, in the very place where he'd been sold and bought as a slave and compelled for thirty years to leap to the commands of others, he walked upright in the sunshine, clad in gentleman's clothes, free to stop at will, to wave at the Set Girls hurrying to their holiday celebration in Montego.

A new year. A new life. Indeed, the very dogs in the road seemed conscious of his manhood, his right to be. *Free Coloured* ... the words resounded over and over in his head, nourishing his vigour, urging him onward.

The anticipation of the welcome waiting just ahead was almost unbearable as Tacooma walked the last mile towards the gates of Bonnaire. Unable to restrain himself, he broke into a loping stride, pacing himself to get the most from each breath. Head down, eyes fixed upon the road, he did not see the carriage or hear the horses until they were almost upon him.

'Out o'the way, nigger. Out o'the way!'

Tacooma stopped, glaring with astonishment at the white faces moving closer - men on horseback and the

driver of the carriage. At the last second he leaped out of the way, falling as he landed. The horses slowed. The carriage creaked to a halt thirty yards away.

'Hey theré you, get over here!'

Tacooma tensed, a blinding fury rising stronger than the pain of bruises on his arms and legs.

'Hey there! I said come! *Now!*'

The rage of his lifetime ignited within him. Harnessing every bit of restraint he could muster, he reached for his hat and rose in silence. Slowly he approached the phaeton, already framing in his mind the words with which he would confront this white-haired *buckra* with the bandage on his face.

It was then he noticed the woman, her fine, smooth features an ebony carving beneath a gaily plumed poke bonnet. Immediately, Tacooma doffed his own hat, allowing his expression to relax into a winning smile.

'Afternoon, Missy,' he said, permitting his eyes to travel over her embroidered gown, enjoying the sight of her as much as the awareness that by doing so he was not yielding to the demands of the other.

'See here, nigger, I'm the one ya talk to!'

Tacooma met the cold, glassy stare with the resolution of a equal. 'You almos' run me down, Sah,' he stated directly, not using the word *massa* on purpose, determined there would be no *quashee* in his manner, no hint of the servility he'd once affected in order to survive.

'Just thank y'r lucky stars I didn't,' the white man snapped. 'What are ya doin' out here anyway? What plantation d'ya come from?'

'Not come from plantation, Sah. Me *free* man, jus' come off dat ship from Englan'.'

'A world traveller, eh?' the man mocked, glancing towards the others who'd begun to edge in closer, chuckling as his eyes sought their approval.

'Yes, Sah! Free Coloured,' Tacooma repeated.

'Sure y'are. An' I'm the King of Spain.'

Now the others laughed loudly, spontaneously, feeding on their spokesman's sarcasm.



'All right, boy. Let's have some truth from them black lips. Where'd ya steal them fancy clothes? Where are ya runnin' from?'

'Me not runnin'. Me *free*.'

'Is that so?' Thin lips curled upward with contempt and disbelief. 'Where's y'r blue cross then - the one y'r supposed t'be wearin' on y'r arm?'

'No wear a ting like dat,' Tacooma protested. 'No gots to on de ship.'

'Well then, let me see y'r papers,' the other challenged. 'Sure, a free man's got his certificate of manumission.'

'No gots dat. Nobody ask for paper in de English lan'.'

'But we're not in England now, are we?' the man continued, leering nastily as his confidence grew. 'But of course ya have y'r certificate of baptism, now, don't ya?'

'Not baptise neidder,' Tacooma said. 'Me Ashanti-man.'

'You mean a heathen, a savage - a slavel!' The man looked smugly, meaningfully around at his compatriots.

'Not slave! Me free me tellin' you. Me set free by dat Missy from Bonnaire!'

The proclamation was like icy water dashed into the *buckra's* face. The man paled, fingering the bandage on his cheek, veins throbbing visibly. 'A Bonnaire nigger, eh?' he wheezed between clenched teeth. 'All the more reason for y'r presence here t'be suspect.'

'No Sah! Dis where me s'pose to be,' Tacooma insisted.

'Well, we shall just have to see about that,' the man answered. 'For now, you'll come t'Oxford Hall, boy. And there you'll stay until we find out who y'are an' where ya rightfully belong!'

'No take me derel!' Tacooma felt the panic bursting from his lips. Terrified, he glanced around, but the other men were already moving closer, circling on horseback, blocking his escape.

'Seize 'im!' the man in the carriage cried, tossing the reins aside and climbing down.

Immediately Tacooma was set upon by half a dozen others leaping from their saddles, pouncing upon him,

grabbing at his arms and legs, wrestling him down flat upon his back. As he struggled against his attackers he heard the sound of fabric tearing, felt a lapel ripped away from his jacket, seams coming apart.

The sole of a boot pressed down against his wind pipe, cutting off his air supply, turning the sky the colour of blood. And then he was being forced onto his stomach, his face pressed roughly into the dirt, arms doubled behind him by strong, cruel fingers working to bind his wrists.

Tacooma struggled, but it was hopeless with his arms tied and his legs and shoulders pinned beneath the weight of knees. Then, suddenly, rough hemp was scratching, slipping underneath his chin and tightening around his neck.

'You goin' t'hang 'im?' someone in the group yelled hopefully.

'No, I don't think so . . . not unless I have to,' the man with the bandage answered, leaping to the saddle of a horse nearby. 'Toss me the other end o' that rope,' he ordered. 'I'll show ya what I'm goin' t'do!'

Tacooma felt the noose shifting, tightening as the knot slipped further in beneath his chin.

'What've ya got in mind for 'im, then?'

'Cut 'is arms loose an' you'll see!'

Tacooma shivered with revulsion even as he felt the bonds around his wrists snap free.

'Very well, gentlemen . . . back t'Oxford Hall!' the leader announced, and kicked the stallion forward.

Tacooma leaped to his feet, racing wildly, fighting to maintain the slack of rope while he worked to untie the noose around his neck. But then the horse's hooves quickened and a scream ripped from his throat as his head and shoulders were jolted forward with horrible, bone-snapping force.

Frantically, desperately, Tacooma ran faster than he knew he could, feet flying, barely touching down. Blindly he grabbed for the rope, flinching as his hands were burned and bloodied by rough strands. And then

the world was spinning dizzily, flying backward too fast for him to keep pace.

In a sickening moment of horror Tacooma felt his toes leave the ground and saw the earth rush up at him.

He awoke in darkness.

Tacooma did not know where he was or how long he had been there. A damp, bone-chilling cold spread through his flesh, emanating from the slabs of stone on which he lay. He tried to open his eyes. The left one had swollen shut. He could not even blink the lid. Grunting, he managed to roll onto his side. Then he lay still, panting, waiting.

The turn of a lock and the shrill creaking of a door swinging back on rusty hinges alerted him.

The one eye that could still see squinted at a candle flame that moved in his direction.

'Hush now. Say nothin'!' a woman's voice warned amid the rustling of silks beside him. 'You stay still. Me fix.'

He had no choice but to obey her. Tacooma lay silent, fighting to dispel the blur. Slowly, he was able to discern the face of the Negro woman in the carriage. But those beautiful features were changed, crumpled and twisted with the horror that her huge, dark eyes now gazed upon.

He forced his own thoughts inward, concentrating on the task of mobilising his lips and forming words.

'Hush!' she admonished once again, reaching for a little bundle she had lowered to the ground. Working quickly in the flickering light she unfolded a bandanna and spread its contents on the cold stone floor.

The feel of liquid against cracked, swollen lips made Tacooma wince. Trembling, he curled his fingers into fists and tried to keep himself from gagging as water squeezed from a cloth trickled down into his throat.

'Come... like dis.' The woman slid her fingers beneath his skull and eased his head up far enough so she could slip a knee behind it. Then his cheek was cradled in

silken folds and he could feel the softness of her thigh through the gown.

Again she brought the cloth to his mouth. Tacooma forced the weight of his tongue forward, pressing the hot, swollen muscle towards the blessed relief of cool water. Suddenly his throat closed, fluttered. He coughed and began to choke.

Immediately the rag was removed and his head nestled deeply in her arms.

'Nuff for now,' she murmured. 'Gots to clean you. Gots to wipe dat blood from you face.' She dipped the cloth back into the liquid and returned again, this time to pat her way across his cheeks.

'Hol' still. Dis hurt some, maybe,' she warned, touching her fingers to raw flesh.

Tacooma groaned as the first sharp pebble was plucked from his forehead.

By the time she'd finished, he lay gasping in her embrace, beyond pain, beyond the ability to respond to it. Only the cradle of her arm around his shoulders kept him from flying into madness.

'Here . . . we try some soup now, yes?'

The sound of her troubled, caring voice urged him to hold on, to stay with her a while longer, to cling to life. Tacooma nodded as the woman reached for a spoon, dipped it into a calabash and placed it against his trembling lips.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by the sound of footsteps walking across the floor above them.

The woman stiffened then moved back quickly, lowering Tacooma's head onto the ground.

'Me gots to go,' she whispered, folding a bandanna underneath his head, a rude pillow between Tacooma and the cold, damp ground. 'Not you worry. Me come back when it be safe. Me fix you sure. Pomelia, she no leave you here to die.'

In the candle light her soft eyes almost smiled. Then the sound of boot heels echoed once again and she was gone.

'Hey dere, you sleepin' still?'

Was it the sound of his own dreaming that had wakened him? Tacooma opened his eye and grinned as best he could, happy, despite his pain, to find Pomelia on her knees again beside him.

'We gots time now. Massa sleepin'.'

As his vision adjusted to the light Tacooma saw Pomelia's night-dress, noticed the disarray of her hair and realised, with revulsion, what the woman must have been doing.

'Not you worry,' she reassured, seeming to read his thoughts. 'Massa set till mornin'. Come - me got dis *fufu* dat you eat 'fore we wash de res' of you.'

The tenderness of her concern, the sound of kindness was as soothing as the pulpy vegetable she spooned into his mouth. Tacooma gulped the mixture, fixed upon his body's need for nourishment. Then, suddenly, his innards started to rebel. He sputtered and choked, then fell back weakly, sagging in her arms.

'Slow an' little,' she reminded as she wiped his face and set the bowl aside. 'Now we fix de res' of you.'

Tacooma tried to stop her, but he hadn't strength enough to speak, or even to cry out as she began to peel the shirt back from his body, moving as gently as she could yet unable, nevertheless, to keep from opening deep wounds where blood had dried the cloth against his skin. 'Is day?' Tacooma whispered.

'No,' Pomelia answered with a patient smile. 'Is night. Late.'

'Still?'

For a moment she seemed confused. Then her features relaxed with understanding. 'you thinkin' bout t'ree night gone since firs' me come wash dem cut. Not you remember udder time? - de time me brings dem ting you wearin'?'

Tacooma gazed down the length of his body, felt his

cheeks grow hot at the sight of himself in someone else's shirt and trousers.

'Here, me bring you dis now,' Pomelia whispered, lifting her hand so he could see what it held.

Aching melancholy filled him as Tacooma recognised the shoes he'd left upon the road. 'How you fin' dem ting?' he rasped.

'Massa sen' me here an' dere, sometime,' Pomelia answered, smiling coyly. 'Me go where de carriage hit you. It take lookin', but me fin' dem, sure.'

He was searching for the words that could express the gratitude he felt when suddenly, awareness dawned. 'Him let you go out dere?' Tacooma blurted.

'Sometime, like me say you,' Pomelia answered, staring curiously as he reached inside a shoe, felt for something, found it and relaxed.

'You gots to do a ting for me.'

Pomelia tensed. 'What you tinkin' now?'

'You gots to go to Bonnaire - tell dem dat Tacooma come.'

'Tacooma ...' she repeated the name softly.

'Please, me beggin' you,' he persisted, reaching for her hand. 'You gots to fin' Missy Emily. Say she bout what happen so she gets me free.'

Pomelia hesitated, glanced away. 'If Massa fin' out - if him tink me do a ting what bring him shame ...'

'You wants him kill me?' Tacooma groaned. 'How long you tink 'fore him come back here, lookin?'

'Massa gone in Spanish Town now, for de meetin' dere.'

'Tacooma go himself, den!'

He tried to lift himself, but strength deserted him and he fell back against the ground.

'No no - you stay!' Pomelia reached to place the ragged bandanna back beneath his skull. 'Me fin' some way to get dere.'

'To say Missy Emily!' he reminded.

'A *buckra*-lady?'

'De *buckra*-lady what make me free.'

Pomelia nodded. 'Not you worry. Me fin' she.' Then, reaching for the wooden bowl she'd brought with her, 'Here, eat dis now. Pomelia come back, soon she can.'

At the first sound of the creaking door Tacooma forced himself onto one elbow, grimacing with pain. But the grimace turned into a smile at the sight of the beautiful black woman dressed now in a pink gown trimmed with lace about the bodice.

'What happen?' he pressed, before she had the chance to kneel beside him.

'How you feelin'?' Pomelia asked, avoiding the question.

'Good . . . good. Say me!'

'Me do it,' she announced.

'You gets to Bonnaire? To de Great House dere, an' see Missy Emily?'

Pomelia barely looked at him, her eyes evasive, disappointed. 'No *buckra*-lady wid dat name dere,' she murmured, a catch in her voice. 'Dem say she gone back in Englan' wid she husban'.'

'Mister Avery, for sure!' Tacooma thought aloud. 'Go back den,' he continued. 'Fin' you udder *buckra*-lady. Missy Lili.'

Pomelia's eyes bulged wide. 'Dat Missy Victoria frien'!' she cried. 'Me know dat one.'

'Is good. Missy Lili help Tacooma.'

'*Buckra*-lady what's frien' wid Missy Victoria no help de negga,' Pomelia insisted stubbornly.

Tacooma was about to tell Pomelia why this particular '*buckra*-lady' could be trusted, but thought better of it, fearful to reveal the secret even at the risk of his own safety. Mercifully, an alternative presented itself, raising new hope within him. 'Mirtilla!' he breathed. 'Fin' *dat* one - de cook!'

Pomelia's expression remained sceptical. 'Why she help you?'

'Dat ol' Ashanti-woman, she me Auntie. Always help Tacooma, since him *pickaninny*.'

'You sure on dat?'

'Me tellin' you!'

'So - Pomelia, she tries an udder time.'

'Now,' Tacooma insisted.

'Is very late.'

'De light come soon. Bes' to run in de dark.' As he spoke, Tacooma reached for one of his shoes, thrust his fingers deep and closed them round a flat metal object wedged inside. 'Here,' he rasped as he pressed a medallion against Pomelia's palm. 'Fin' Mirtilla and give she dat.'

Pomelia stared at the shining piece of gold marked with symbols that she did not comprehend.

'Not you worry. Dat ol' woman, *she* understan', *she* know what to do,' Tacooma said in answer to the questions in her eyes.

Then, as he watched Pomelia leave, Tacooma felt his heart move out into the darkness with her, through the fields and forest towards Bonnaire - aching with the memory of Mirtilla's kindly face - hoping desperately that the old woman was still alive.

## 6

*'You'll regret this, Lili Osborn . . . if it takes the rest o' me life . . .'*

For nearly two weeks Patrick's words had haunted her from the moment she woke to the time she closed her eyes at night, reverberating through her dreams, startling her upright in her bed. Such was the case tonight.

Lili propped her pillows up against the headboard, wondering how to pass the time until daylight. Above her, shadows danced across the ceiling. Somewhere beyond the louvres a tree branch banged against the roof



of the verandah. It sounded ominous, prophetic - as though the restlessness within her extended out into the night. Unnerved, she pushed the mosquito netting aside and dragged herself across the room, thinking to draw the shutters. As she approached the open window she glimpsed a figure moving through a stand of chinaberry trees behind the house.

Lili blinked, then stared, working to discern a recognisable form among the tangle of silhouettes and shadows bobbing in the wind. But the harder she concentrated, the greater her alarm became as every shape appeared to be an arm, a leg, a body stealing through the night, until at last she had to turn away, plagued by childhood tales of *duppies* that wandered through the dark - spirits of the departed come to wreak their vengeance upon the living.

Rubbish! Lili assured herself, certain this was merely her imagination. But moments later when she heard a creaking on the staircase and the sound of footsteps padding softly through the upper gallery, Lili wasn't quite so sure.

She froze, aware the housegirls were asleep two floors below and would not hear her screaming - at least not soon enough to thwart an intruder. But just as quickly she relaxed, a flush of shame upon her cheeks. There was no need to be afraid in her own home. None of the Bonaire slaves would hurt her. Not with hundreds of Ashanti among their number who knew she cared for them, protected them and knew, undoubtedly, that she was the great granddaughter of their priestess, Fushabah.

The chamber door eased open and a lantern moved inside.

'Mirtilla! What on earth ...? For heaven's sake, what are you doing here?' Lili demanded.

But Mirtilla would not be dissuaded from her need for caution. 'Come - we say by de fire,' she breathed against Lili's ear, then waddled towards the far side of the room.

The urgency in Mirtilla's manner, this sudden need for stealth, reactivated the tension Lili had barely managed

to subdue moments earlier. Quivering, she hurried to the daybed, sat down stiffly beside Mirtilla, reached to cover the woman's fist with a damp, trembling hand. 'Tell me,' she begged, her voice as dry and rasping as the hiss of steam escaping from the blackened logs behind them. 'What is the matter?'

In lieu of a direct answer, Mirtilla withdrew her hand from Lili's grasp, inverted the fist and spread her fingers to reveal a shiny metal object. 'Is Tacooma,' she whispered hoarsely, bringing the lantern closer in order for Lili to see the proof of her words more clearly. 'Him back wid us.'

Lili recognised the medallion, a cherished relic from the Old Land. She remembered the sight of it in Tacooma's possession and how he'd told her it had belonged to his father. But she could not recall the significance attached to the twelve squares carved into the gold, or fathom the implied catastrophe of its being now in Mirtilla's care. For long moments she stared at it in silence, torn between the urge to laugh and cry, to shout her joy and relief as well as her anger for having been needlessly frightened by an excitable old woman.

'But this is good news, is it not?' she offered at last, content to let her resentment slip aside before the greater importance of her cousin's returning, suddenly excited by the thought of seeing him again. 'Where is he?' she demanded passionately, starting to rise. 'Here? ... Now? ... At Bonnaire?'

Shaky fingers closing suddenly upon her wrist kept Lili in her place. 'Is bad trouble come,' Mirtilla announced, setting the lamp beside her feet. 'Dey's got him dere in Oxford Hall. Mistah Sloane, him catch Tacooma for a slave - locks him in de cellar dere so no one fin' him!' Huge eyes fixed imploringly on Lili's misted over, sparkling with the terror of the thoughts behind them. 'For sure we never sees him 'gain - less someone do a ting what make him free.'

Lili caught the inference and felt instinctive obligation raise a painful lump inside her throat as she experienced

the impotence of her position, the inadequacy brought about by years of never being allowed to make decisions. 'But how can you be sure of this?' she whispered without conviction, stalling, grasping at straws in her distress. 'Perhaps the situation is not so grave as you suppose,' she added then stopped, ashamed of that damnable ineptitude preventing her from leaping to the rescue of an old ally, the very man whose efforts had kept her from being born a slave.

Tormented, she jumped from the cushions, wringing her hands, searching frantically through her mind for some solution. 'What are we going to do, Mirtilla? *What are we going to do?*' she groaned miserably, leaning over the old woman to grip her fleshy arms for strength, for support.

'Is Juba-Lili got to tink of sometin', ' Mirtilla replied calmly, as though, in her greater wisdom, she could see an answer just beyond Lili's reach, merely waiting for the girl to perceive it.

'But I *cannot* go to Charles!' Lili flung back, presuming this to be the logical assumption. 'You know very well that he has gone to Spanish Town. 'Twould require days for someone to ride there and fetch him.'

Mirtilla nodded, agreeing yet oddly unimpressed. 'Is *Nyankupon* what Juba-Lili need to see,' she said, returning the responsibility right back to the girl, allowing it to hover like a living, tangible presence in the tense silence between them.

Lili recognised the meaning of that statement, the twinkling in the old cook's eyes and shrank back, recoiling from awareness. 'Oh no, Mirtilla ... please ... you cannot be thinking that,' she stammered. 'Do not ask me to go to Fushabah. Not now. Not yet.'

'She you granny. She *Okomfo!*'

'Do you think I could possibly forget it?' Lili hurled back; the painful reminder reverberating through her like a proclamation of doom. 'But it would not be a simple matter of relaying news of Tacooma's plight. You know that!' she insisted, kneeling to grasp Mirtilla's

hands, staring into the old woman's eyes to search there hopefully for sympathetic understanding, the slightest flicker of concession. Finding none she persisted nevertheless, swept along on a rising tide of fear. 'You know what she will do,' Lili cried. 'She will try to foist the old Ashanti ways upon me, to make me believe as she does and be like her. I am not prepared for that, Mirtilla. In truth, I do not know that I shall ever be. *Please* . . . try to understand. I've hardly begun to really live in the world, to discover who I am and what I believe. How can I make such commitments as Granny would demand of me? I am not ready to even consider them!'

The ancient countenance remained impassive, expressing more with silence than the loudest, most adamant rejoinder. 'Juba-Lili know who she be an' dem ting what's got to happen,' Mirtilla proclaimed finally. 'All dem year since you a *pickaninny*, me say how Juba-Lili gets to Bonnaire for live like *buckra*- lady till de day she help her people. No you listen on you auntie? Not you hear dem ting she teach you? Is no way for hidin', gal, when *Nyankupon* make a time to come.'

A sense of being cornered brought tears of anger and frustration. 'But why *now*? Why *me*?' Lili cried, glaring at the reprobation in the old woman's eyes that told her further protest could only be a losing battle. 'Surely there are others far more worthy of a priesthood than myself - elders like Granny who were born in Africa and raised to worship your gods. I am not even fully of the blood. I am only part Ashanti. You know my father was a white man!'

'*Oba di oba adie na obarima di obarima adie* . . . De woman pass 'long to de woman, de man to de man,' Mirtilla insisted, negating Lili's protest with the quoting of Ashanti law. 'Cause you granny be *Okomfo*, Juba-Lili carry de *ntoro* of de Sky God.'

'Obviously, I am in no position to prove whose influence is running through my veins,' Lili replied sourly. 'But why must I be the one to deal with this particular task? May we not compromise, perhaps? -

dispatch a slave, one of the Ashanti-men, to go into the mountains and deliver the message?

Gnarled fingers stroked Lili's hair as they had done so many times to soothe away the tears of childhood. 'Tink on what you sayin'.' Mirtilla urged more patiently yet no less steadfast than before. 'All dem Bonnaire slave remembers Tacooma. Dey know him be Free Coloured now, an' dey loves him from de time him try to help dem, like when him kill dat *busha* what hurt dem so. How you tink dey do when dey hear dat Massa Patrick got dat man? - an' when de talk move roun' dis parish to udder slave what's sure dem *buckras* is holdin' back dere freedom from de king of de English? Tink you dat dere be a way to keep dem neggas from risin' up, from makin' fire on Oxford Hall an' plenty udder great house, from takin' guns an' killin' white men, maybe?' The old cook leaned forward very close to Lili. 'Wan' you have dat fightin' like de ol' time? Wan' you see de poor slave runnin' from dem dog an' hangin' in dem tree? *Wan'-you bring a war, gal?*'

With each word Lili felt the truth slice deep, clean through to her resistance, hacking away any last feeble hope she might have had of keeping in the background. Spent, deflated, she hung her head and nodded meekly.

'Very well, Mirtilla. I shall do as you say.'

A long exhalation of breath warmed Lili's cheeks and seemed to chase the chill from her bare shoulders. 'Dat's me good gal,' Mirtilla crooned, smiling with approval. 'Come now, an' me say you how to fin' de way up t'rough dem mountain,' she invited eagerly, the smile turned impish, elfin, smoothing the wrinkles of three quarters of a century. 'Is plenty year since Mirtilla go dere in Ashanti Town, but you auntie not so ol' an *winji* dat she no remember.'

She had always suspected this day would come, sensed within herself the inevitability of her return to the secret mountain village where she had been born. True, it could have been a quirk of fate that delivered Tacooma

into the hands of adversity, but even as she considered this Lili knew deep down that something much more powerful than mere coincidence had brought her to this time and place, this crossroad at which she must confront the past and make choices to determine the course of her future.

Behind her, coastal plains and verdant foothills lay mantled in a morning haze with Bonnaire hidden underneath the misty cover. Forcing aside an uncomfortable feeling of separation from all things safe and familiar, Lili willed her concentration upon the narrow trail before her, reaching for the medallion Mirtilla had placed around her neck with the exhortation that it not be removed until the girl had safely reached Ashanti Town.

Within another hour's time the protection of thick forest covering had thinned. The road was filled with treacherous curves that hugged the edges of steep mountains and gaping sinkholes and bottomless chasms lay in wait below. This was Cockpit country - the 'Land of Look Behind' - where fugitives sought sanctuary and bloody battles had been fought as long as slaves were captive in Jamaica. Afraid of glancing downward, Lili stared instead at the tuft of hair between the horse's ears, placing her trust in Lady's innate good sense as they moved along the rocky trail. It occurred to her more than once that her life might be in jeopardy, that perhaps she might be set upon by criminals in ambush. Yet even as she looked askance towards groves of feathery bamboo and squat banana trees beside the road Lili knew there could be no retreating. She had given Mirtilla her promise to reach Ashanti Town and find Fushabah. A promise she must keep. For in the doing Lili sensed she was about to find something of herself waiting to be discovered as well.

The sound of water rushing through a nearby gully distracted Lili from her thoughts and tempted her to the side of the road. Parched from the heat, covered by an irritating film of dust, she slid from the saddle and led

Lady down into a leafy hollow, eager for the refreshment of cool water and the opportunity to rest her aching limbs.

It was as though she'd passed from the fires of hell into the sweet tranquillity of paradise. Lili stood at the edge of a verdant grotto, transfixed by the idyllic splendour before her: a rush of water foaming over rocky steps, bubbling into stone pools ringed with rainbows of blossoms and lush, tall fern. Unable to resist, Lili hurried to the water's edge, shed her garments, and waded in among the flowing ripples.

The bracing water of the mountain pool returned life to her flesh and spirit. Gliding under graceful bowers, Lili swam naked, luxuriating in the feel of her long hair fanning out upon the surface of the water, the tingling in her breasts and thighs as icy currents stroked her flesh. Relaxed, contented, she yielded to an overwhelming sense of peace and belonging, a feeling of primordial connection with others who had gone before her - forebears in her mother's lineage who assuredly had known such pleasures as this, frolicking through virgin forests in a different land and other, simpler times. Certainly it was their influence that accounted for the part of her that seemed to remember and yearn still for uncomplicated freedoms, Lili realised. And just as suddenly she recognised another startling rush of intuition that must have always been within herself as well - an ineffable calling in the blood that harkened back through centuries before this earthly lifetime and into worlds beyond men's mortal incarnation, where gods like *Nyankupon* dwelled and the spirits of departed ancestors beckoned to her.

Disturbed by thoughts she had not meant to deal with, instinct she was not prepared to live by, Lili dove into the shimmering depths then broke the surface of the water in response to a nervous whinnying and the stamp of hooves. 'Tis all right Lady; I have not abandoned you,' she sang out, vaguely embarrassed, as though somehow her thoughts had been overheard.

It was then she noticed the disturbance that had startled the animal: an unmistakable crunch of footsteps in the underwood.

Lili gasped, arms flying to cover her breasts, shivering with terror at the sight of dark eyes peering from the foliage, black faces turned towards her with unmistakable hostility. Fighting not to scream, she waded into knee-deep water, moving towards the pile of clothing she had left upon the bank.

Too late. A dozen men leapt screaming from the forest, forming themselves into a wall of enemies on shore, each face a replica of the others' threat and hatred, outraged by the presence of a white woman in their domain.

Lili flung herself towards deeper water, taunted by imaginings of what the sight of her might very well provoke. Splashing wildly, she thrashed across the forest pool, driven by the eyes still fixed upon her, the certainty of minds behind them savouring her nakedness, conjuring unspeakable acts of violence to punish an intruder. Desperately, blindly, she propelled herself ahead then stopped, gasping as her hand struck something solid: the unmistakable hardness of a calf muscle.

Leaping away from the man's leg, Lili cowered in the shallows, terrified beyond speech, yearning to jump up and run yet held in place by instinct warning her that she must not stand or dare expose herself again. And then, amid the whirling confusion of hysteria, Lili sensed other bodies moving towards her, men closing in from all sides.

'*Memeneda Koromantee!*' The words rose from the place in her soul where they'd been lying dormant, flushed from the dim reaches of memory by the urgent need of the present. Again Lili screamed the ancient *Ntam Kese*, the Secret Oath, the sacred password of the Ashanti people taught her by Mirtilla long ago in her childhood.

At the sound of this, the men surrounding Lili fell back, open mouthed. All except one: their leader.



Towering, fearless, he held his ground, scrutinising her with narrowed, knowing eyes. Then, slowly, he raised an arm and pointed towards her breasts.

'Show me!' he commanded.

'No ...' Lili whimpered, horrified, misinterpreting.

'*Dat!*' he snapped, pointing to the medallion. 'Give it here.'

Weak with relief, beyond concern for modesty, Lili stumbled towards him, reaching to lift the medallion from around her neck.

The man examined it carefully, turning it over and over in his hands.

'Where you get dis?' he demanded.

'It is for my great grandmother!' Lili cried. 'For Fushabah ... *Okomfol!*'

The pronouncement of the woman's name, the utterance of the word for priestess in the African tongue seemed to rob the man of his swagger. 'Who you be?' he asked, his manner turning strangely deferential.

'I am Juba-Lili,' she proclaimed, revitalised with confidence. 'Do you recognise the name? Do you know what I am saying?'

Immediately, the leader began to yell at the others, waving the medallion, shouting in a dialect Lili did not understand but recognised from the many times she'd heard Mirtilla and Tacooma speak in *Twi*. Miraculously, the other men turned their backs and began to move off rapidly, as though to look upon this woman's nakedness could bring them deadly harm.

Shivering in the aftermath of disaster narrowly escaped, Lili moved to where she'd left her clothes and hurried into them. It was when she'd fully dressed that she heard the leader speak her name again, his voice mellowed with respect.

'Come,' he said, his gaze meeting Lili's with new understanding as he reached to hang the medallion back around her neck. 'We takes you to you granny.'

She could feel the eyes of strangers peering out from

everywhere, appraising her, dissecting her, confounded by the presence of a *buckra*-lady where no white man dared to venture.

Lili sat on Lady's back, self-conscious as the band of hunters led her through the settlement where tiny wooden cottages on stilts clung to the hilly, rough terrain. For the first time in her life she regretted the beautiful gown she wore and felt embarrassed for the pale whiteness of her skin. She yearned to meet the glances of the old women and little children staring silently and distrustfully. She longed to tell them that they needn't keep their distance and that she was one of them, a direct descendant of their priestess. But even as she thought these things Lili felt the guilt, the burden of unworthiness force her own eyes downward. In the months that she'd been free to do so she had made no effort to approach this place, made no overt acknowledgment of her kinship with the people of this village. She was here today because she needed help, because Mirtilla had insisted.

Lili bore the weight of what she knew in silence, her thoughts now turned to what she'd say when her great grandmother and herself were face to face again. All the reasons she'd prepared to excuse her continuing charade seemed trivial now in the light of other realities at hand. For herself, the most that Lili dared to hope for was forgiveness, or at least some reasonable compassion for her predicament. But to even consider this seemed somehow callous and shamefully self-serving beside the greater importance of her real business here: the need to save Tacooma's life.

'Hol' dere. We say you when to come.'

The leader's voice cut through her contemplations. Nervous, apprehensive, Lili slid from Lady's back then stood to watch the men who'd brought her lope single file up the incline towards a hut set apart from the rest of the village.

She waited for what seemed like hours, hoping for acceptance, conscious all the while of restive movement

coming from behind her and uneasy whisperings as people from the village gathered to observe this oddity among them. Finally, unable to endure it, Lili squared her shoulders and willed her legs to move her towards the meeting place.

The wattle-roofed hut stood shaded and serene beneath a canopy of breadfruit trees and flowering poinciana spread above its earthen walls. Beside it a carefully tended kitchen garden yielded rows of Guinea-yams, pig-tail peas and mountain-callaloo protected by crude fencing from a pen where piglets squealed and bare-necked *sensay*-fowl pecked for buried kernels. Lili tiptoed towards the back, hoping she might overhear some bit of conversation that would indicate the mood of her reception. But no sooner did she round the corner than she stopped, amazed by what she saw: not the animated interchange that she'd expected, but the men who'd brought her standing meekly with bowed heads and clasped hands, patiently awaiting their own acknowledgment.

On a patch of ground before them an old woman sat cross-legged, gazing directly into the sun. She did not blink, did not move a muscle but appeared to draw the blinding rays into her being, feeding upon them, glowing with an inner vitality that seemed to Lili less reflection than enhancement of the brilliance shining down from heaven. For long minutes the priestess remained in this position, mindless of the things around her, moving her lips but uttering no sound. At last she stirred, inhaling deeply, seeming to accept the slow return of temporal awareness. Reaching for a wooden staff she raised herself and moved indoors. Only then did the others leap to motion, speaking all at once as they hurried after her and disappeared into the house.

Lili raced around to the front of the hut. The sight of the woman, the aura that surrounded her had undermined what little optimism Lili had been able to create. How could she expect such a person to understand her

indecision and comprehend her need for acceptance among white people?

'*Okomfo* say for you to come now.'

The leader's voice stopped her just as she was reaching for the saddle. Lili swallowed hard, fighting back the tears and trying not to panic. 'Very well,' she managed in a shaky voice then started towards the building, gathering what little courage she could still command to see her through this inescapable ordeal.

Stepping into the house of the *obeah* woman was like entering a hallowed realm, a timeless place where otherworldly forces seemed to linger and repose in endless twilight. Symbols of their presence abounded: white-washed walls were hung from floor to thatch with bits of mirror; strings of dog's teeth adorned every surface; tufts of vulture feathers were stuffed in every crevice. Over one crude wooden table were heaped piles of sea shells, beads and coloured bottles and close by another was draped with hide, its corners barely visible beneath a startling farrago of parrot beaks, human hair and bones of animals stripped clean and polished to an alabaster sheen. Even the cookfire smoke drifting through pale sunbeams near a single window smelled of frankincense and camphor, transforming the scent of damp earth into a mystical, magical ambrosia.

'*Nana n'ka'so ... my daughter's daughter's daughter ... Juba-Lili!*'

The sound of her name spun Lili towards the seated figure veiled among the shadows in a corner.

'Granny ...?' she whispered timorously, straining through the dimness for some detail of the features wreathed in pipe smoke then stopping, drawing back with caution from the broomstick of an arm unfolding in her direction.

'Come, come. Granny say you better here,' a reedy voice directed and a palm smacked hard-packed earth.

Lili shivered as she stepped across the room, searching for a way to begin, for words to bridge the awkwardness

of this reunion. Gathering her skirts, she lowered herself to a thin straw mat, aware of flickering eyes taking a hasty inventory, probing, prying, piercing deep enough to bare the secrets of the soul.

'Granny *know* you comin', ' the old woman confided. 'She hear it in de win', she feel it in de night.' Old hands reached to grasp the young ones, to seal a bargain with the pressing of flesh. 'Nyame - de god of all de god, de one what we call *Nyankupon* - Him say me dat she no forget, dat Juba-Lili come back to her people, back to where she born.'

Waves of consternation weighed heavily upon her spirit drawing Lili's hands away to twist and fidget in her lap. 'Perhaps this time you are mistaken,' she responded, fearful to admit the truth only slightly less than to encourage false impressions.

'No, no - not mistake!' the old woman insisted. '*Nnipa nhina ye Onyame mma, obi nye asase ba!* ... We's all de chil' of *Nyame*. No one be de chil' of eart!'

'Yes, yes,' Lili conceded hastily, not wishing to provoke the woman. 'But Tacooma is the one who's back. He is in desperate trouble I'm afraid. Here, he sent this to you.' She removed the medallion and handed it across, eager to divert this conversation from herself.

A moment's glance confirmed the medal's authenticity. 'Dis be a sign!' The woman clutched the offering and bared a toothless grin. 'In Guinea, in de ol' lan', is de marke of *osene*, de crier, de one what bring de news. It prove dem word him say be true.' She raised the plate and pointed at the squares, the symbols carved within them. 'Look on dis. Is *abusua*, de twelve tribe what be firs' in Guinea, long before de *buckra*-man. Is from dat blood Ashanti come, an' all de king in all de village gots to be. See here ... *Abrootoo* ... *Oyoko* ... *Doomina* ... *Abadie* ...' She went on to name them all, her voice husky and intense, pointing in turn to each then rubbing her fingertips over the gold in a circular motion to indicate the aggregate. 'Is all de chil' of *Nyankupon*, what's some in Guinea, what's take across de water, but still togedder ...

here.' She pointed to her chest. 'Not you see it, gal? Dat you, dat me, is all Ashanti waitin' to be free.' She leaned to loop the string of hide back over Lili's head. 'Is sign of ting what come soon in dis country, ting what's bring wid Juba-Lili!'

Lili looked away, distressed by this interpretation. 'Please Granny, I think you give me too much credit,' she said, baulking at the notion of her place in the old woman's scheme of things. 'I do not deserve such importance. We are only distantly related, the Ashanti and myself - our fates far less entwined, I suspect, than you and Mirtilla are willing to concede.'

The woman flung the pipe away, reached for her cane with one hand while the other captured Lili's wrist. 'You tink you *buckra*-lady, yes?' she spat, and rose onto her feet. 'Me show you what be so!' She started for the door, tugging Lili behind her.

Lili stumbled through the portal, down the path, past the knots of people gaping as their priestess dragged the white girl through their midst. Around her everything began to whirl, the clouds and treetops spinning until her sense of self-propulsion disappeared and it was Granny's will alone that seemed to move her over rutted ground and sloping hills.

Soon, Lili found herself before a wooden building. There was a small door in one of the walls, guarded by a pair of men who greeted Fushabah in tones of reverence while all the time their eyes were fixed in disbelief upon the trembling girl beside her. The woman uttered something rapidly in *Twi*. At once, the door was opened.

'Come,' she said. 'You *mumma* waitin'.'

Apprehension chilled her flesh as Lili followed Fushabah into a long, dark room which was stifling and airless despite the open spaces where light crept underneath the eaves. Squinting through the gloom, she saw the priestess lift that portion of the *lapa* draped across one shoulder and tuck it in beneath her arm. This done, the woman slipped the sandals from her feet and stood upon them, gesturing that Lili do the same.

Spellbound, Lili followed suit then gazed towards a narrow platform built of upright poles with cross sticks placed upon them. Along this surface, intricately carved, charred and smoke stained chairs rested on their sides. From the way that they were crumbling, Lili guessed they'd been here countless years. The old one turned and motioned Lili closer. 'Come,' she coaxed. 'Is nothin' in dis place what hurts you. Jus' dem ting you gots to know - ting bout you people Granny show to Juba-Lili.'

The gentle chiding conquered her reluctance. Lili let the woman take her hand again and lead her closer to the altar.

'See dem ting here?' Fushabah began. 'Is *agwa*, de stool what each Ashanti gots to have for hol' him spirit while him livin', an' for udders should remember when him gone. Dis one here . . .' She pointed to a blackened relic, '... is for me datter, Mimba, you *oba-barima*, you granny.' A misty veil covered the old woman's eyes. The words caught in her throat. 'Long time gone when Fushabah be Bonnaire slave, Mimba say me ting jus' like you granny knows you tinkin' now - dat she no feel is such a ting like *Nyankupon* an' she no wan' for bring she baby to Ashtanti Town.'

'You mean she let you run away without her?' Lili asked, astounded at the thought.

'She do,' the woman answered, blinking tears back from her eyes. 'An' when dey fin' dem slave be gone, de *busha* in Bonnaire, him wan' for Mimba say him where she mumma hidin'. Mimba be Ashanti, an' she no say nothin' when him hurts her, when him beats her, even when him *kills* dat gal what's got new baby of she own - de chil' Luida, what's you mumma.'

Swallowing repeatedly, Fushabah moved to the next stool and caressed the blackened wood.

'Dis here for Luida, what's also like she mumma. Dat one never listen to *Okomfo* neidder. Tink she live like *buckra*-lady. Wan' for stay wid Massa John in Allamanda Hall. When she love wid white man an' a boy-chil' come,

*Nyankupon* be vex for dat, make Missy Caroline fin' out an' kill de baby.'

'Caroline ... *Rutland*?' Lili gasped, connecting two ideas for the first time. 'Do you mean to say that I once had a *full* brother and that horrid woman ... *murdered* him?'

'Is so,' Fushabah replied softly. 'Name of Jemmy. But you mumma no fin' out who done dat killin' till the day what him be bury, an' you big already dere inside she belly. Still, Luida, she jumps on Missy Caroline, pullin' hair, tearin' she dress, kickin', yellin', fightin' like to kill ...' She paused and shook her head, 'Is why de pain come soon ... too soon.'

'The pains of childbirth?'

'Yes. By den is night. Luida worry 'bout de new baby. So she beg Tacooma an' him bring she in Ashanti Town to granny.'

'Was that the night my mother ... died?' asked Lili, fighting tears.

'Is so. But while you comin', Luida say me all dem wicked ting she done an' how she sorry. Den she beg dat *Nyankupon* show Juba-Lili how she help dem neggas what you mumma done so bad.'

Lili pondered this and tried to understand. 'Then why did you not keep me here? Mirtilla said that it was you who brought me to Bonnaire and gave me to the Osborns.'

'Sure ting. Tacooma an' you granny scares dat Missy Vivian real good. Dey say dat she gots to keep you like a *buckra*-baby or *Okomfo* make bad *obi* on Bonnaire.'

'And she agreed to this?'

A devilish chuckling brought a smile to tight, dry lips. 'You granny know de way to scare dem *buckra*. Time pass, an' dat lady fin' is bes' she do like Granny say 'less she no wan' for go on livin'.'

'But didn't you realise that sooner or later the truth would have to come out? For heaven's sake, I might have married Charles - my own half brother!'



The old woman shook her head. 'Not while Missy Caroline is still be 'live. Dat one, she plenty sorry when she fin' de trut' 'bout Juba-Lili.'

'Sorry?' Lili croaked. 'She tried to kill me also! If I hadn't grabbed her hand and forced the pistol in the opposite direction ...' Lili stopped, revolted by the memory. 'And directly afterwards, when Vivian saw what happened ...'

'*Nyankupon* strike she down jus' like Him promise Granny!'

Lili was unable to respond, amazed by Fushabah's clairvoyance. 'Are you telling me you *knew* all this would happen ... that you *planned* it?'

'Is de only way dat Juba-Lili gets Bonnaire. *Tumi nyina wo asase so ... de power is in de land!* An' now is time for Juba-Lili take dat power - use de ting what *Nyankupon* is bring for help de negga in dis country.'

'How?' cried Lili. 'Just what is it you expect of me? I cannot even find a way to free Tacooma. That is why I came to you!'

Dark ancient eyes were sparkling. 'Tink you dat you all alone in dis?' The woman draped an arm round Lili's shoulders. 'Not you ever have de feelin' is some udder ting what's watchin' over? Some ting in you what's put dere before you even born? Hol' back. Look on dis, see if you fin' de trut' what Granny say you.'

Lili started to protest then stopped abruptly, suddenly remembering what she had sensed while swimming in the grotto.

'Yes? Is so?'

'Now that you mention it ...' She stopped again, distressed, confused, unwilling to concede that there could be an actual connection.

'Say me. Say you Granny. Better when you true. A ting like dis not go way cause you hol' it dere inside.'

Yielding, Lili told the woman what had happened - how it seemed that she'd latched for just a moment onto feelings from a different time, a different place. 'Of course that doesn't prove a thing,' she added, needing to

belittle the experience and wishing she had never said the words that would assuredly add strength to Granny's argument.

The old one's eyes were wide with wonder, beaming and euphoric. 'Is *Ta Kora*!' she exclaimed. 'Is *Tano*, son of *Nyankupon*, what live dere in de water, come to Juba-Lili! Sure Him bring she all dem feelin' what be only for Ashanti.'

'No, 'tis quite impossible,' Lili said, slipping on her shoes. 'Twas mere coincidence - no more than understandable imaginings inspired by the atmosphere.'

'You sure on dat?' the old woman challenged. 'Den you no be 'fraid tomorrow when we goes to see Him. In de mornin'. Early. Is Friday, de special day for *Ta Kora*.'

'No, Granny really, I don't think ...'

'Is nothin' what you losel'

'Oh, very well,' Lili said, knowing she'd been outwitted. 'If it means so much to you.'

'Mean more for Juba-Lili,' Fushabah replied. '*Abusua bako, mogya bako* ... *Same tribe, same blood. Ta Kora* show you dat what Granny say be so.'

With that, she turned back towards the altar, whispering things that Lili did not understand but felt quite certain must be words of praise to thank the spirits of Mimba and Luida for what had come to pass.

Long after Lili had fallen asleep the old woman remained alert, squatting beside her, reaching out from time to time to touch the soft black hair, the beautiful features which, despite their whiteness, bore an unmistakable resemblance to others whom she'd loved. *Same tribe, same blood*, she thought again, as she observed long lashes fanning far beyond the lids just like Luida's - the aquiline nose and, chiselled cheekbones that might easily have belonged to her own daughter.

Watching Lili, Fushabah experienced a bittersweet perspective of her own life stretching backward through the years to Kumasi in Africa where she'd been stolen from her family, through the Middle Passage where she'd

lain in chains among the dead and dying till one man had noticed her, the *buckra* sailor who had taught her how to love then sold her and her unborn child into slavery. Generation after generation, the *ntoro* of the white man mixed with pure Ashanti blood, resulting in what might very well be the last of the *Oyoko* women in Jamaica: Juba-Lili, lying here before her, placed by *Nyankupon* in her keeping.

But how to care for her? How to protect her? How to save her in this strange land where the young were stolen from the God of gods before they'd had the chance to know Him?

Still, *Nyankupon* had chosen through the years to say so many things to Fushabah, to reveal so much of His intention, and to place before her now what very well might be the one remaining chance, the final hope of liberation on this island. She must not fail Him, must not disappoint those venerated ancestors who'd watched her, helped her all along and were depending on her this time more than ever. No, she would not fail she vowed. With time, with patience, Juba-Lili would be taught to see her place in things, to know for certain who she was, how to fulfil the destiny that *Nyankupon* had surely fashioned for her.

The old one crossed the room to stand before a covered object that had waited in this place for more than twenty years. With tear-filled eyes she pulled the cloth away, revealed a pure white stool that had been left upon its side so that no wandering spirit could disturb it: Juba-Lili's *agwa* - the one that Fushabah had carved for her in keeping with the promise to a dying granddaughter. Gently, quietly, she placed it in a shaft of moonlight coming through the window then knelt to check the bindings wrapped so long ago around its base, the straps of hide that bound Lili's soul lest it abandon her during her days on earth. Satisfied that all was as it should be, Fushabah curved wrinkled palms around the smooth white wood, gazed through the portal at a million stars that blazed across the midnight sky.

'*Nyame boa me ... Help me, God,*' she murmured. Then she turned and hurried back into the darkness, eager to prepare herself for *Fofie*, Sacred Friday, when she'd ask His son, *Ta Kora*, to speak with Juba-Lili and to show the child the way.'

7

Before the dawn had touched the mountains, Fushabah was ready: robed in white, the holy colour; head clean shaven but for patches on the sides and down the middle as befitted a priestess of *Nyame*; lines of clay across her forehead, on her cheeks, along her shoulders, arms and chest. *Me Nyankupon, me sere wo nkwa, na me sere wo ahooden ... My God, I pray to you for life, I pray to you for strength*, she pleaded. Then she went to rouse the sleeping girl.

'Come, *Nana n'ka'so* ... is time.'

She wakened, screaming, panicked by the touch of fingers to her shoulder, leaping from the mat to huddle in the dimness with her back pressed flat against the wall.

'Not be frighten, Juba-Lili. Is you Granny here. You safe.'

The sound of gentle, loving words allayed the shocking impact of the full regalia of Ashanti priesthood. 'Granny,' Lili whimpered, leaning out to reach beyond the artifice and touch the person there behind it, seeking as a child would the reassurance of familiar things. 'Oh Granny, I was having such an awful dream!'

At once the savage-looking creature turned into the loving matriarch.

'Not worry, gal. Is jus' the '*kra*, de strengt', what leaves we sometime when we sleepin'. But you be all wake now. *Nyankupon* be wid you sure, an' soon you hear Him say

you t'rough Him son, *Ta Kora*, an' you knows dat Him be everywhere wid Juba-Lili - even in de dark.'

The priestess raised herself and moved toward a nearby table where a wrap-around cloth garment waited, neatly folded. Lifting it, she spread the coarsely woven fabric so the girl could see it clearly. 'Up you quick and put you on dis *lapa* now so *Nyankupon* be sure Him lookin' on Ashanti gall'

The touch of wryness in the woman's words rekindled Lili's own good humour. Nodding her agreement she wiped the tears away and stood, reaching for the buttons on her gown, comfortable once more and willing, for the present, to do the things that Granny asked of her.

The world felt strangely safe and congenial as Lili followed Fushabah along the trail beside the river, moving downstream towards the grotto. From a place somewhere ahead of them the sound of drums and singing rolled back through the forest. It was joyous, heartfelt - filling up the morning with the celebration of God's being.

Lili smiled, experiencing love for Fushabah, imagining what Granny must have been like in her prime. Despite the decades stretched between them and the different standpoints from which they viewed their lives, she could not help but feel enormous envy for the spirit of this woman, for the power of that life force surging pure and strong within her always. Knowing Fushabah was to observe the very essence of integrity - a certainty of purpose, strength of character and brash, unflagging courage that Lili wished were hers. But that, she realised sadly, was like wishing she could be some other person. It was asking the impossible.

Or maybe not . . .

It wasn't long before they'd reached the spot where clear white water splashed down into pools of iridescent blue. Here, Lili paused to gaze at her reflection, searching deep within herself. Could it be possible, she wondered, that there might indeed be truth in Granny's

words, that life could take on a meaning other than the tepid mediocrity she'd known? Not that she hoped for immortality, of course, or harboured vain pretensions that some greater power would choose her to rescue the Ashanti. Still, the thought that a lingering trace of Granny's blood ran thick enough in her to fire some spirit, spark some will, enabling confidence to create something of value from the fact of having been at all, was so utterly enthralling she could hardly bear to let herself conceive of it.

What would she not give to spend her days pursuing something that she truly deemed worthwhile, to feel her presence here on earth could make some lasting contribution, some meaningful improvement in the quality of other peoples' lives. Indeed, to realise such fantastic miracles would be to make her own life worth the living and to end, at last, the painful need to justify this pale, inglorious existence.

The impact of such unaccustomed thinking jolted Lili out of contemplation just in time to see a flash of white robes disappearing in among the leafy thickets. Lili hurried after, ducking under branches, hopping over creepers stretched across the forest trail. She wished fervently that by willing so, the revelations hounding her might fade conveniently into oblivion.

But just as she was thinking this the jungle opened unexpectedly into a clearing with a three-walled, wood enclosure built upon its rocky floor: the temple of *Ta Kora*, and the last place, Lili knew, for seeking refuge from disturbing self-awareness.

As soon as *Okomfo* emerged from the forest, the music, the drumming, the dancing stopped and reverential silence fell upon the villagers who gathered for this holy day. The priestess did not pay attention to the eyes that watched her and the white girl following behind. Already she could feel a quickening around her heart, a familiar, welcome touch of disembodiment that told of ancestor-spirits drawing nearer, floating round her,

ushering her closer towards the presence of the deity. Swiftly, single-mindedly, she led the way into a cool and darkened chamber, the place belonging to the greatest of Ashanti gods upon earth, son of the Supreme Being, that mighty spirit which was everywhere.

Long ago, when Fushabah had led her band of runaways into these wild mountains, a forest temple had been faithfully created in the image of another well remembered from the Old Land. Upon an altar, covered still with woven cloth, the sacred brass pan shrine stood ready, consecrated to receive the spirit of *Ta Kora*. In front of it but lower down was placed the vessel of a lesser god, *Ati Akosua*, whose presence here was necessary also to effect communication.

Elders who'd been keeping vigil rose to greet their priestess. Soft footsteps and guarded murmurs mingled in the dimness as the younger faithful entered to arrange themselves upon the temple floor.

*Okomfo* felt uncertainty beside her, sensed that *Juba-Lili* did not know just where to place herself. She raised her hand and instantly *akonnuasofo hene*, the head stool carrier appeared, bearing one carved chair beneath each arm. With solemn, courtly gestures he held the chairs behind their owners, waited while a cloth was spread, then placed the chairs upon it. Now, *Okomfo* and the only known descendant of her line were seated.

The shrine of *Ati Akosua* was uncovered and a circular headrest, the *kahiri*, was handed to *Okomfo*. Accepting it, she sprayed some spittle on the surface, touched it to her forehead, to her breast, then passed it underneath her left knee. Settling back more firmly on her chair she then arranged her bare feet on the cloth so just her heels were resting there and set the headrest on her skull. Then she waited motionless while the *bodua*, a cow tail switch, was pressed into her hand and the tabernacle of *Ta Kora* set atop her head.

At last, the proper time had come ...

*Okomfo* spoke out softly, calling not the son of God, Himself, but whispering the name *Ati Akosua*. For just

as it was not correct upon the earth for kings to speak except through their interpreters, so it had always been with gods, each one of which had his *okyeame*, his special spokesman.

*Odamankoma obosom, ankobi na huni, okyere abrane ... Creator's god, who sees although He is not present, who seizes strong men ...*

Fushabah began the incantation, flattering the deity, reminding Him of past great deeds and miracles He'd worked far back beyond the time when history was written down.

*Asante 'hene obosom ... Wo na wonkwanta aye hu ... God of Ashanti Kings ... who is truthful, who hears us always ... draw closer ...*

At this point everyone leaned forward, staring at the priestess, waiting, spellbound, to see if He would answer.

Suddenly a violent trembling spread across *Okomfo's* flesh, rippling the painted arms and flaccid neck. Her right hand floated upward and the room resounded with the echoes of a flat palm slapping loudly on the pan.

A hundred pairs of sparkling eyes grew wide with understanding at this sign which meant the spirit of *Ta Kora* from within the shrine was passing now into the body of *Okomfo*. Everyone still capable of drawing breath began to whisper, '*Nana mayke o ... Grandsire, good morning.*'

*Okomfo's* eyes rolled upward in their sockets and her lashes fluttered rapidly until the lids were closed and still. The lines of clay along her skin began strange motions once again, undulating, quivering in rapid patterns till it seemed impossible that flesh could still be joined to bone. The priestess placed the cow tail in her mouth, bit hard to hold the *bodua* while she plucked some strands of fibre from its handle. Raising these, she dropped the object from her lips and spoke in tones distinctly altered from her own, her voice the deep and haunting echo of another conscious being.

*Efiri Osai Tutu pen so de be si ... From the time of Osai Tutu, if anyone were in need and came to me I made*



things right for him. When kings went forth to slay their enemies and came to me I gave them strength, I gave them courage. I am called *Ta Kora*, the mender, for if things are spoiled it is I who fix them . . . *Nnipa a odo me na wa ba me nkyen* . . . The one who loves me comes to me, and when he leaves I go behind him and go with him and prepare a safe path for his journey. And this one who has come, who has beheld the place wherein I dwell, allow the water to be sprinkled there upon her. Many of my children here have said they will not serve my father, the Supreme god. In my own self still, I am the son of God, and if my grandchildren will draw nigh to me, I too shall stand behind them . . .

The voice trailed off and heavy stillness filled the room. All eyes remained intent upon *Okomfo*, who sat motionless for many minutes. Finally, the stool bearer rushed from the shadows, bowed three times and whispered '*Me da mo ase* . . . I thank you,' toward the brass shrine and reached to lift it from *Okomfo's* head.

Still the white-robed priestess seemed to linger in a daze. Then slowly, drowsily, she raised her fingers, brushed them softly past her eyes, as though awakening from sleep.

A sudden twisting of her head and the *kahiri* fell and rolled across the ground. No sooner had it come to rest than the others leaped to stare at it, to contemplate the way it lay, which surely indicated if *Ta Kora* wished to speak again. Determining amongst themselves the audience was over, they rushed to gather round their priestess, eager to repeat the words that God had uttered through her precious lips.

And all the while *Okomfo* listened quietly, inscrutable except for flashing eyes fixed on Lili, as if to say '*I told you so*'.

The moment that she left the temple Lili was besieged by everyone who'd been inside pressing round her, grinning happily, chattering in words that needed no translation

to communicate their friendship and acceptance. Even so she stayed beside the one she knew, keeping close to Granny as they started back along the forest trail. Quietly, attentively, she listened while the woman offered patient explanation, repeating things just told her by the others, revealing what *Ta Kora* had decreed.

The total faith, this obvious, unquestioning devotion touched Lili deeply, filling her with an even greater understanding of the older one's serenity and endless fortitude. Yet all the while, within herself, the girl felt vaguely disappointed, somehow incomplete. A dozen questions tumbled in her mind, urgent questions that required urgent answers. But it wasn't till they'd gone back to the grotto and she and Granny had taken their leave, returning to the hut, that there was an opportunity for private conversation.

'How you tinkin' now?' the old one asked, aglow with pride and satisfaction as she filled a bowl to wash the lines of clay from wrinkled flesh.

Lili gazed out through the window, silent and thoughtful, seeking the most diplomatic way to phrase this. 'Very impressive,' she conceded. 'Awesome. Inspiring. But hardly the solution to my problem.'

'What dis now?' the old woman protested, rushing to the girl. 'You *dere* when Him be sayin'. You *know* dat *Nyankupon* go wid you.'

Lili sighed, smiling tiredly, wanting to be kind and gentle yet pressured still by painful indecision. 'I am not disputing this,' she offered lest the woman think her altogether hopeless and beyond redemption. 'Tis only that . . .' she had to stop again, unable to express it; loath to risk the loss of Granny's love.

'What? Say me!' Fushabah demanded in a tone revealing clearly there was nothing anyone could do, no power strong enough to threaten what she felt.

'Have you forgotten Tacooma?' Lili whispered meekly. 'What has happened brings me none the closer to his rescue!'

'Tink you so?' the old one smiled indulgently. 'Tink

you dat *Ta Kora* not show soon to Juba-Lili how be bes' way now for make Tacooma free?'

Lili felt inclined to scream but forced her voice to stay calm.

'Perhaps we ought to help Him start things up a bit,' she offered, hoping to be tactful. 'Surely Granny, if you'd send some men to Oxford Hall - under cover of darkness, of course - there might just be a way to ...'

'No!' The answer was immediate and unequivocal. 'It's not de way *Ta Kora* make for do de ting. Is Juba-Lili gots to set Tacooma free. Is Juba-Lili gots to fin' de way for it. No more she *pickney*-gal what's livin' dere like *buckra-chil'*. Juba-Lili be Ashanti, sure. One day be *Okomfo*! G'wan gal - you no *bobo* - not you still see what be so?'

The sting of Granny's anger stripped away the last of Lili's self-control.

'No, I do not see it!' She stormed across the room to rip the *lapa* from her body, snatch her petticoats and step into them. 'Tis well and fine for you to say I'll find a way - that time and faith will bring forth miracles. But why will you not help me *now*? Have you no heart, no feeling? How can you stand idly by while poor Tacooma may be ... dying?' Angry words gave way to loud, racking sobs.

Instantly the woman was beside her, holding Lili close again and whispering encouragement.

'Granny make you promise now, come all de way from Guinea. Same like how she mumma say, what never be a lie.' With trembling hands she cupped the tear-streaked face. '*Onyame ma wo yare a, oma wo aduru ... When Nyankupon sen' sickness him also sen' medicine,*' Fushabah vowed gravely. 'But if you tink it not be so, me baby, an' dis jus' sweet-mout' Granny makin', say me else how still be negga go on livin', all de year we massa's slave!'

The point made, further argument was impossible. Lili realised this and chose to plead her cause no longer. 'Granny, I am sure you've helped me understand,' she

answered as she hurried with the buttons of her gown.

But all the while the only thing she clearly understood was that she'd failed. Failed herself, failed Tacooma, and wasted one more precious day.

## 8

A vague sense of abandonment weighed heavily as Lili watched the hunters sent by Granny to escort her through the mountains disappear again into the dense concealment of their jungle sanctuary. Wearily she touched her heels to Lady's flanks, content to let the mare convey her slowly through the remaining miles winding from the foothills towards the boundaries of Bonnaire.

Ahead of her a green and golden vista stretched from Duncan's towards Montego, rolling peaceable beside the dazzling opalescence of the ocean's noonday fire. But viewed from Lili's vantage point, the things once so impressive seemed much less important now - remote, inconsequential - dwarfed by something other than the alteration of perspective caused by distance. Sugar works on vast estates with pale smoke spiralling from tall, stone chimneys ... the clock tower of St. Peter's Church in Duke Street and beyond in Falmouth Harbour where great sailing ships braved lethal shoals to reach safe anchorage beside the wharves ... pleasant views but, unlike yesterday, bereft of charm and uninspiring.

As she considered it, this pall of lethargy was no surprise to Lili. It was small wonder in her present state that familiar things were not reassuring, did not bolster confidence or tempt return. Instead of coming back triumphant with the situation well in hand, the help she'd sought had been denied her; nothing yet had been resolved. Indeed, all Fushabah had done was turn the

nasty matter back into her charge with only vague, amorphous promises of aid forthcoming from above. Heartening prophecy no doubt, so far as Granny was concerned, but hardly cause for celebration with Tacooma still in Patrick's cellar and no closer to release. Now what was she to do, for heaven's sake - march up to Oxford Hall and single-handedly effect the man's escape?

The mere idea of such audacity raised Lili straight up in the saddle, alert and highly energised despite the blistering heat of the day. *What would happen if I dared attempt it?* she wondered, capriciously at first, then with increasing vigour as the passing moments brought sweet visions of success. With Patrick Sloane in Spanish Town, Lili knew that at least there'd be no risk of confrontation from that quarter. Indeed, the only one she might encounter would be Victoria who, after all, was Lili's friend, or had been prior to that Christmas Day disaster. And suddenly it was all there before her - the perfect alibi, a brilliant camouflage. What finer pretext could she wish in case of interception than to claim her visit an attempt to keep their camaraderie intact?

And that, Lili realised, was precisely the way she would proceed.

By the time she reached the seaside road her soul was afire with the thoughts in her mind. Every muscle, every nerve ending was alert, vibrant, charged with bold ambition as she turned the horse and headed eastward in the opposite direction from Bonnaire. Crouching low, she clucked her tongue and goaded Lady to a gallop, almost to flight it seemed, as trees sped by and sultry updrafts buffeted her cheeks and shoulders. Tresses streaming, sleeves and skirts ballooning in the wind, she raced past carts and carriages, impervious to shouts of protest from the drivers choking in clouds of dust. She was obsessed with one sublime objective and the glorious, freeing, newfound courage to pursue it.

The crack of gunfire split the air as she came thundering round a curve. Lili felt the horse break stride

and pressed her heels down hard against the stirrups just as Lady reared in terror.

'Easy, girl ... be calm now,' Lili panted as the horse pranced sideways, dripping streams of lather from the bit clenched in her teeth. 'There now ... 'tis quite all right,' she went on, patting Lady's neck and easing in the reins until the animal had reached a standstill barely inches from a steep embankment where the rush of rain streams carved a gully deep into the earth.

'Now this'll be yer final warnin', nigger!' a man's voice threatened behind tall hedges. 'Don't care who y'are or what y'say yer doin' here. Set one foot on Mister Sloane's plantation, uninvited, and the next time I'll be aimin' at yer head!

Lili recognised the voice of Billy Austin but found it difficult to reconcile such harsh ill temper with the image of the affable young chap to whom she'd once been introduced. Surprised and curious, she walked the horse up to the gate and peered inside to see the overseer striding down the drive, the muzzle of his rifle pressed between the shoulders of a tall mulatto dressed, apparently, in Sunday best. Shaken, drenched with sweat, the olive skinned intruder, trembled violently, huge eyes flashing terror.

'For heaven's sake, Sir. What is happened here?' she called out with dismay.

'Caught 'im poachin' game on Oxford land, I did!' the white man barked. Then Billy doffed his hat and beamed the smile that she remembered. 'Sorry, Miss. I didn't want t'take that tone with ya. Just doin' m'job, ya know.' The thought produced a look of grim resentment. 'Hard enough t'run this place without the added chore of roustin' coloureds what would steal the food from Mister Sloane's own table.'

'Bobbie Norton don' steal *nothin'* Miss!' the prisoner croaked with pleading eyes upturned towards Lili. 'Dese bird come from swamp lan' by de bay.' He raised a hand in which were clutched two ringtail pigeons and a quail. 'Me brings dem here for Miss Victoria.'

'Sure ya did,' young Austin snarled.

'Is sol' the man insisted, offering the gift to Lili. 'Dey for de lady, here - from Bobbie Norton an' his mumma.'

'Very well then,' Billy snatched the prize away. 'If that's the case I'll see to it the mistress get's em . . . soon as she returns.' Again, hard metal dug at unprotected ribs. 'Now off with ya, and just be grateful I'm not Patrick Sloane, else you'd be lyin' dead upon this road instead of goin' free!'

The man's gaze leapt from Lili to the overseer, resisting comprehension, seeking reassurance that the words were only meant in jest. But as silence told him that indeed he'd been mistaken, that the lady here was someone other than he'd thought, the spirit seemed to leave the man, to drain from him with one despondent sigh.

'Yessah,' he relented. 'Bobbie goin' now. Me gun back, kindly? Is all me got for catchin' food.'

'The blazes I will!' Billy growled. 'Be freezin' in hell afore I'll place a weapon in a nigger's hand! But if a bullet's what yer cravin' . . .' He cocked the hammer, aiming squarely at the man's right temple.

'Mister Austin, *don't . . . please!*' Lili cried. 'Surely there's no need . . .'

Billy turned and winked, a smile of devilment showing clearly that he did not mean to pull the trigger, but inviting Lili to join him for some harmless sport.

'Yessah! Me goin', Sah!' Bobbie Norton backed away and limped along the road, his left leg dragging slightly stiff behind the other, causing him to stumble in his haste and to fall. Rising from his knees he hobbled onward, causing swirls of dust that veiled his sad retreat.

The vulgar ring of heartless laughter drew her attention from the ugly picture of a poor man fleeing for his life. 'Really, Billy, was there any need to be so cruel!'

'Cruel, ya say? Scared a year off of 'his life I'll wager and ee's got it comin' too! Did ya hear 'im lyin' t'me face? And that was but the tail of it! Looked me in the eye 'e did

when I discovered 'im, an' said ee'd come t'see the mistress.'

'Well, perhaps he had,' she answered. 'Could he not have come to ask permission of Victoria to hunt on this estate? I'm told that many Free Coloureds earn their way by shooting game for the planter's table. This man would not be the first ...'

'Oh, there was a reason given,' Billy interrupted, barely holding back his laughter. 'Said that ee's the bastard son of Patrick Sloane. Now tell me, have ya lately heard a better one? F'sure these coloureds know t'lie!'

The sound of Billy Austin's words disgusted her. Lili had to force herself to keep from screaming.

'Victoria is not at home you say?' she managed.

'No, Miss. Went off to Montego straightaway from second breakfast. Said she had some business there.' A knowing grin appeared. 'Third time this week,' he added. 'That is real important business, I would say. But if you'd care t'wait ...' He left the rest unspoken as his eyes roved slowly over Lili's gown.

'Just let me have that gun,' she snapped and reached to grab the barrel.

'Now what would you be doin' with that?' Billy asked, observing Lili's struggle not to drop it.

She did not answer. Swinging Lady round she galloped off and left him gaping after her in utter disbelief.

She'd hardly ridden back around the bend than Lili had to move aside and make way for a train of oxen pulling hogsheads filled with sugar to the wharves at Falmouth Harbour. Nervously she waited till the road was clear, then sped on through a leafy tunnel where the boughs of giant ceibas offered cool relief in twilight shadow. Just as she burst again into the glare she spied the figure of a man alone, spiritless and disconsolate, shuffling through the heat of the day.



'Bobbie! Bobbie Norton!' she called to him and waved the rifle.

He turned his head, but at the sight of her dove for a copse of possumwood and wild tamarind that grew between the roadway and the sea.

Lili rode to where she'd seen him disappear and tethered Lady to a huge poinsettia in blossom. Breaking cobwebs with the rifle, sweeping vines out of her path, she stepped into the tangled growth determined that she'd make amends.

'Mister Norton! Wait there, please! Do not be frightened. I'll not harm you.'

Her answer was the crunch of footsteps moving rapidly away somewhere ahead of her. Striking off in their direction Lili waded through a sea of leaves and branches, heartsick with the agony she'd seen cross the man's features. Driven by that memory, she thrashed along until the woodland opened to a narrow strip of white sand beach.

At the water's edge stood Bobbie Norton, gaping at her, his face full of horror as he saw Lili stepping into the open. Trapped with no place left to hide, he thrust both arms in front of him, the fingers splayed as if to fend off bullets. 'No, Miss . . . please . . . don't shoot!' he screamed and edged through sparkling powder into swirls of broken shells and seaweed cast haphazardly upon the shore.

Suddenly it seemed his feet were swallowed past the ankles and he toppled forward to his knees. Abandoning all hope he folded low down to the ground, face tucked between his legs, forearms crossed above his skull. Then nothing of him moved except his coat tails, flapping like the wings of birds unable to fly free.

Lili thought her lungs might burst as she slogged awkwardly through burning sand, wishing she could reach him faster, yelling, 'Look! I've thrown away the gun!'

Only then did he respond, slowly, tentatively, squinting into blinding sunlight as she suited action to

the word. Bobbie lifted, tried to stand, but weakened and without the fear of death to drive him barely reached his hands and knees. Gulping air, swaying with exhaustion, he followed her approach in silence till at last the girl stood over him.

'Well, now ... this must be ... the most uncommon way two people ... ever met,' she panted, smiling weakly, grateful to observe the tension easing from his troubled eyes.

'Sorry, Miss ... for all dat ... runnin',' Bobbie fell back heavily upon his haunches. 'Me sure you gonna shoot ... dat *busha* play a trick an' sen' you after Bobbie tink him free to go.'

'No, no. That horrid man is still at Oxford Hall. I followed only to return your gun.'

Bobbie stared with disbelief. 'You do dat ting ... for me?' he whispered.

Lili glanced away, embarrassed. 'You said you needed it and I believed you.'

'Is true,' he answered, gazing downward, poking fingers into sand. 'Long time pass wid no work comin'. Hard for man wid one bad foot to fin' a ting what him can do.'

She looked back at him, noticing the soft, brown hair, the freckles lightly sprayed across his nose.

'Were you injured?' Lili questioned gently.

'One time, in de workhouse ...' Bobbie started, then withdrew to silence, wincing at the memory. 'But me gots to fin' some money. Food be scarce, an' wid me mumma ol' an' sickly, need be twice it was before.'

'Your mother - yes - I heard you mention her,' Lili went on, eager that the conversation not dissolve to awkward silence. 'I take it that the two of you live hereabouts?'

'In Montego, Missy.'

'And you walked ... all that distance? Out to here?'

Bobbie nodded, sighing loudly. 'T'ree time now, since firs' me hear dat Miss Victoria come back. But always *busha* dere, what never lets me near dat house. Still,

Bobbie tryin'.' He shrugged with resignation and moved again to get up on his feet.

Lili felt a lump rise in her throat as whirling outrage filled her. Stooping down, she reached for Bobbie's elbow, needing to support the man, to offer something of herself.

'Mister Austin said you claim to be the son of Patrick Sloane. Is that the truth?'

'Is so,' he told her softly. 'Me mumma's name be Cuba. Once ago, she slave what's own by Massa Patrick - pretty gal him dresses fine an' keeps up at de Great House wid him. Is dere in Oxford Hall dat Bobbie born an' live six mont' till papa - *massa* - bring de lady what him marryin' from Englan'.' Now, deep creases lined his forehead. Bobbie struck off angrily across the sand.

'And naturally, it wouldn't do that Patrick have a coloured mistress and a halfbreed child about to greet his bride,' she finished for him, hurrying to keep abreast, wondering at the heartlessness of such a man who could so easily abandon both his comrade and their child.

'Him sell we quick to Missus Norton in Montego. She widow lady what keeps mumma sewin' till she almos' blin' an' sen' me out to work de cane. But all dem year we save de penny till der's 'nough what buy free paper.' Bobbie reached down to retrieve the gun and thrust it underneath one arm. 'Is den de trouble come an' me stay t'ree mont' in de workhouse. When it done, me foot like dis ...'

Bobbie raised one trouser leg to show deep, twisting scars. 'De firs' day out, me wan' for go see Massa Patrick. Say de man dat he me fadder, beg so hard him gots to help. But mumma tink me bes' do nothin'. She make me promise not to come.'

'Your mother acted wisely,' Lili told him, shuddering at her memory of Patrick's views concerning Negroes. 'The man's devoid of human decency. He never would have helped you.'

Bobbie nodded, seeming to accept this. 'So now me try anudder way,' he said. 'When me hears 'bout Miss

Victoria, me tinkin' maybe she not same like fadder. Maybe when she look on me . . . ' He stopped and stared at Lili, boyish now and bashful-looking, asking with his eyes if she saw any sense in such persistent optimism.

'I am sorry that I do not know the lady well enough to answer you,' she told him honestly, aware that their friendship, in the main, concerned itself with matters of a much more insubstantial nature, the commonest of which was a preoccupation with the island's marriageable men. 'But that is unimportant now, for I shall be the one to help,' she told him, knowing that she wanted to, knowing that she must. 'Let us go to where I live and pack a basket full of lovely things your mother will enjoy. And surely we can find some suitable employment for you at Bonnaire.'

'Bon . . . naire?' He said it softly, reverently, as though the word itself were magic. 'Is you de lady from dat place?'

Lili nodded. 'Come, we'll go there now, together. 'Tis not very far from here,' she urged him.

Bobbie reached out, brushing Lili's wrist with long, thin fingers. 'Why you do all dis for me?' he asked. 'Me never hear 'bout *buckra*-lady what's a one to help de coloured.'

Lili hesitated. 'Let us just say you and I have more in common than appearances might lead one to believe,' she murmured.

Then, as it occurred to her, she took his arm and smiled brightly - thrilled, elated by the sudden opportunity created in their meeting.

'Besides, if you are willing Bobbie Norton, there is also something you can do for *me*!'

Oddly, it was Mirtilla who offered resistance after Lili had set forth her plan.

Seated on the rear verandah, the three of them huddled in a corner, Lili shared with eagerness the method she'd devised to free Tacooma. It would be so smooth and simple, she was certain. After dark she'd drive a closed

barouche to Oxford Hall with Bobbie inside, underneath a blanket. Then, while she engaged Victoria in conversation, he would slip down to the cellar, fetch Tacooma and conceal them both within the carriage. After a time Lili would take her leave and drive off, bringing both men through the gates and back to safety at Bonnaire.

'Is no good... no good,' the cook had grumbled. 'What if someone see dis? What if *him* be catch?' she said, nodding towards Bobbie.

'Of course there is some risk involved. But mine's the only method left us,' Lili offered, hoping that the other would relent.

Mirtilla made no further comment, but the rapid movement of her eyes told Lili that the two of them must speak in private.

'Would you excuse us, Mister Norton?' Lili said lightly despite her irritation. 'I shall only be a moment.' She rose and motioned that Mirtilla follow her into the house.

'Not you do dis. Not you trus' him!' hissed Mirtilla.

'What are you saying?' Lili whispered. 'The man has agreed to help us!'

Mirtilla thrust her chin out with displeasure. 'No Free Coloured gonna do a ting what vex de *buckra*. All dem yaller-skin be same - tink dey's white, make dey's white!'

'Believe me, Bobbie Norton has good reason to despise Patrick Sloane every bit as much as we do. The man has been denied his birthright, sold when he was just a babe.'

The woman did not look impressed. 'Yes, yes, me hear him say so. But dem light ones all forget dey's only white-a-middle. All the time dey sweet-up to de *buckra* sayin' 'yassah' dis an' 'yassah' dat an' all dem brown skin gals is cruel lady, shake dem hip an' call de negga low an' wuthless!' Mirtilla had to pause for breath, shaken. She was trembling, overwhelmed by fierce emotion. 'Dem wid Guinea-slave sure hackles dem an' does dem worse den *buckra* massa. Listen how me say you, Juba-Lili. If you Granny here she say you same!'

Lili stood confounded in the aftermath of such an unexpected show of prejudice. 'Perhaps she would, Mirtilla. But Granny is not here and since she's given this responsibility to me I must attend to it as I see best. As soon as it is dark I leave for Oxford Hall!'

The old slave drew back sharply. Mulishly she crossed her arms and blocked the doorway, searching Lili's eyes for signs of weakness, waiting for this youngster to regain her senses. But as the moments stretched between them Lili also stood her ground, fired with a strength of will equalling Mirtilla's, until at last it was Mirtilla who surrendered.

'Very good den, Missy. If dat how it gonna be, Mirtilla helps you too.'

'Tis is quite out of the question,' Lili answered. 'I would not think of bringing you into this or endangering you in any way.'

Mirtilla pursed her lips and clucked her tongue, free with the confrontation past to flash one of her puckish smiles. 'Tink you dat Auntie gonna let you do dis all youself? Mirtilla not be goin' dere, but still she knows a way to help.' She sidled up to Lili, leaning close to whisper in her ear. 'Auntie know de gal in Oxford Hall, same what say me dat Tacooma hurt dere. Me fix it so she waitin' by to show de way down to de cellar. She make sure no one roun' what see de ting.'

The thought of such invaluable assistance pumped new vigour into Lili's spirit. 'You are wonderfull' she cried and hugged the woman close as though they'd never quarrelled. 'Whatever would I do without you? Whatever would we *all* do?'

The old cook pulled herself erect, scowling, scornful, flustered by this loving outburst. 'Is nothin' what get done 'less Juba-Lili lets Mirtilla sen' for Miss Pomelia! Quick you now an' hide dat man where no one sees him, 'fore him spoil dis ting what Missy an' Mirtilla doin'.'

The voice was stern, the words reproachful. But Lili could not miss the gleam of eagerness alight in smiling eyes.

For days a rising fever had been ravaging his flesh, its strident voice reverberating in his brain until at times the thinnest line remained between reality and madness. Tonight, that madness hovered closer than it ever had before.

Tacooma sat with shoulders propped against a cold stone wall, staring dully through the light cast by his single candle towards the narrow stairway with the locked door at its top. Perhaps he'd counted wrong this time the voice within him taunted. Maybe when the clock upstairs had tolled the hour he'd added in his mind an eighth bell to the seven that had really sounded.

No, that wasn't possible, Tacooma knew. Counting chimes had been the first thing he had taught himself to do down here. It was the only way of knowing day from night inside this place. And he had learned to listen to the sounds of life above stairs, concentrating till he clearly recognised the comings and the goings in the household overhead: the heavy tread of overseer's boots; the click of ladies' slipper heels; the softer pad of barefoot slaves. But worst of all were sounds of horses' hooves along the drive, for they could very well be bringing Patrick Sloane to Oxford Hall.

A queasy wave of sickness rolled within him and Tacooma pressed a shirtsleeve to his dripping brow. Something must be very wrong the voice inside insisted. For sure it was past eight o'clock and Pommie always came to him by now: a safe time, when the supper things were cleared away and house slaves had retired to tiny cabins. 'Their time', as he'd come to think of it, when she would sneak downstairs with news and something good to eat.

The emptiness inside his belly added to the agony of throbbing wounds and aching bruises. But even as he touched his stomach Tacooma knew the hunger was not draining him; the fear was. Its voice was there always,

mocking his anticipation of escape, adding to the torture of not knowing what would happen next. Surely by this evening he'd expected . . .

The scratching sound of claws against rough stone propelled the man from thought to action. Reaching slowly so as not to make a noise he moved his fingers to the pile of rocks that he'd collected for this purpose. Trembling, trying not to breathe, he squinted through the dimness, all his faculties alert.

Again the sound of cautious movement. Closer this time. Close enough to fix upon.

Tacooma hurled the rock. A piercing squeak was followed by the scampering of little nails into the darkness. *Safe dis time*, he thought, relaxing back against the wall. But that would only last a while. The rats were coming out more often, growing bolder, drawn by wounded flesh. He could not fend them off forever, nor last much longer, startled constantly from sleep by predatory creepings. Just the tickle of a tiny spider on his arm was enough to bring him leaping up in panic, flailing wildly in the darkness, trembling, whimpering, living in his mind that moment when sharp razor-teeth would sink into his flesh . . .

*Where was Pomelia?*

Cold sweat thickened on his shoulders as Tacooma yielded to forbidden thoughts, the fantasies he dared not look at longer than a moment. Since Pomelia told him that Mirtilla had the medal he had clung to visions of release, promising himself that soon he would be saved. Throughout the night and all this day he'd comforted himself with the heady image of *Okomfo's* warriors swooping down to storm the house to free him and then burning the building, in much the same way as he had once led rebels through the hills and set the Great House at Bonnaire afire.

But as the hours dragged endlessly Tacooma's faith began to wane. Perhaps Ashanti Town was there no longer. Maybe Auntie Fushabah was gone . . . powerless . . . or dead. Maybe this, maybe that, until the bile rose up



inside him and bone-deep numbness like the feel of death began to edge away the last of reason.

'From somewhere outside the sound of carriage wheels and trotting hoofbeats thundered down into his soul. *An enemy!* the voice inside him whispered. '*Massa Patrick an' dem buckras!*'

Tacooma stiffened, captive of his terror, no longer able to distinguish it from ideas of his own creation. Would they catch Pomelia on her way to him and pick this time to kill them both?

So lost was he within the ramblings of his mind, Tacooma did not sense the closeness of another human being till a key turned in the lock and footsteps started down the stairs. Panicking, he scooped some rocks into his arm, blew out the candle and crawled to hide himself behind a pile of broken furniture. He cowered there in darkness, one rock ready in his hand, his muscles poised to spring, to fight, to kill if necessary. This time he would not be taken alive.

'Tacooma?' Her whisper, soft as velvet, floated through the blackness. 'Tacooma, is you dere?'

Tacooma tried to answer but no sound would come. He thought to crawl to her but arms and legs refused to move. The voice inside him screamed that Pommie had not come alone, that someone else was there with her and forcing her to coax him out. Breathlessly he crouched amid the rubble, dazed and shaken, past communication now, incapable of one more painful feeling.

Footsteps mingled with the swirl of skirts. A lantern moved through the blackness and she called to him again, a little louder this time and more intensely, but still guided by the need for caution.

'Me knows you in dere. Where you be now?'

He wanted to answer, yearned to say her name. But something stronger than his will commanded and he had to listen. Silently, he watched the lantern's glow and saw it move in his direction.

'Is no time for playin' now!' Pomelia's voice had taken on an edge of agitation. 'Me knows you dere someplace.'

Get you out here where me see you.' Suddenly, she stopped, amazed to see him in the corner, staring blankly, blindly. 'Tacoomal'

Pomelia groaned and hurried over to kneel beside him. Whispering his name, she placed the lantern on the floor and rocked him back and forth as though he were a child. 'Is done now. You be leavin' here,' she murmured as she smoothed a palm along his burning cheek. 'Dey's comin' for you now. Mirtilla say Miss Lili gonna bring a carriage an' some man what helps you hide in dere. Is true! Mirtilla say me so. Is why me take so long for comin' here. Is where me be jus' now - at Bonnaire - talkin' wid dat woman what's you Auntie.'

When no answer came, Pomelia peered intently through the lamplight, searching for some spark of recognition that would tell her he had understood.

'You hear me? Say me somethin', *please!* Say somethin' for Pomelia!'

As comprehension dawned, she pulled him back into her arms and held him tightly, swallowing her tears and choking on her anger.

'It still be done,' she said. 'Pomelia stayin' wid you here till someone come. Till Missy takes you 'way where it be safe again.'

That promise made, Pomelia settled down to wait beside him.

## 9

The clacking of the carriage seemed to match the pace of Lili's heartbeat as she drove towards Oxford Hall. She sat with reins clutched tightly in damp fingers, not daring to peek into the darkness of the vehicle and satisfy herself,

again, that Bobbie's presence could not be detected.

As she reached the mansion Lili was surprised to see a sulky parked beside the steps and for a moment her courage faltered. But just as she was wondering who the visitor might be she noticed movement from the shadows and heard the voice of Billy Austin calling her.

Her heart thudded. She'd forgotten all about him.

Lili stopped the team and hopped down to the ground. 'Good evening, Mister Austin. How very nice to see you again!'

'Likewise I am sure.' He grinned and brought her slender fingers to his lips. 'But what is it that brings ya out alone might I inquire?' He glanced towards the carriage.

'Heavens, Mister Austin, gentlemen make far too much of chaperoning ladies every time we set foot out of doors! 'Twas just an impulse for some after dinner company. No need to rouse postilions. You did say Miss Victoria would be at home this evening,' she reminded him.

'As you can see, the lady's occupied.' Austin nodded towards the sulky. He thrust his hands into his pockets, looking glum. 'I, too, had hopes of spendin' time with her on such a lovely night. But she has other plans.' He kicked a stone and sent it skittering across the grass.

'Do I detect a note of jealousy?'

Billy turned from Lili's smiling eyes. ''Tis only natural that a man desire the company of a beautiful companion, especially when 'ee spends 'is days among them bloody niggers. Many planters satisfy themselves with dark-skinned wenches. As fer me, I cannot bring myself to touch their putrid flesh.'

She stiffened as his gaze moved over her. 'If you'll excuse me now, I think I'll make my way and say hello to Miss Victoria.'

'I have already told ya, she's engaged. Why not remain with me an' we can have ourselves a pleasant stroll.'

'That's quite all right; I'll not stay long,' she countered.

The huge front door stood open. Lili took the liberty of walking straight inside. Halfway across the gallery she was stopped by high-pitched laughter ringing with a hollow stridency that Lili understood quite clearly. Swallowing a knowing smile she set off in its direction, curious to meet the man with whom Victoria was dining, certain that his presence would be helpful to her all the while that Bobbie Norton did his work.

Lili slid apart the doors that led into the dining room and stopped, amazed by what she saw.

'Why, Lili ... what a pleasant surprise!' Victoria was blushing fiercely. 'Please come in,' she managed with a brittle smile.

The man beside her got to his feet immediately and bowed.

'Lili dear, allow me to present the Reverend Andrew Baker,' Victoria said in quivering tones. 'Andrew ... Lili Osborn, our neighbour at Bonnaire.'

'My pleasure, Miss Osborn.' The deep, well modulated voice was not without its own edge of discomfort. Hazel eyes blinked rapidly. 'I trust you will not misconstrue my presence here. Were I aware that Mister Sloane was not at home I should most certainly have waited for another time to accept Miss Sloane's invitation ...'

'Now now, Andrew Baker, that is quite unnecessary,' Victoria chirped and motioned him back to his place. 'Miss Osborn is my *dearest* friend. Surely she knows Father well enough to realise he is often called away at short notice to attend to some official business of the parish ... don't you dear?' She turned to Lili with a look of pleading in her eyes.

'Forgive me, Reverend, if my presence here discomforts you,' Lili answered, sidestepping the question, unwilling to deceive a man whose life was pledged to honesty and innocence. 'Please rest assured that I am most delighted to meet you and to welcome you to Falmouth.'

The broad shoulders lost their tension. A healthier hue appeared in pale cheeks. 'Your understanding puts me

greatly in your debt,' he answered in a voice returned to flowing richness. 'In truth, Miss Osborn, I have not found many planters half so well disposed towards one who labours for the Baptist Church. In fact, I'd hoped this evening might afford the opportunity to make a friend of Mister Sloane who, Victoria informs me, ranks among the most devout in this community.'

Now it was Victoria who leaped out of the chair, fighting to maintain her equilibrium. 'Reverend Baker, you will excuse us for a moment, won't you?' she said, flashing signals of distress towards Lili. 'I've need of just a few private words with my friend. You do understand?'

'By all means,' the Reverend answered as he brushed a shock of wheaten hair back from his forehead. 'Delighted to have met you, Miss Osborn. I hope we shall have the opportunity again.'

'This way, Lili dear.' Victoria took Lili's elbow, turned her round and guided her into the gallery.

'I daresay you are the last one I'd expect to see at Oxford Hall!' she snapped directing Lili towards the well behind the staircase. 'After all the trouble that you've caused between my father and Charles Rutland.'

'Come now, you cannot believe that I had anything to do with that. If you don't know your father well enough, let me assure you that he needed no encouragement.' She stopped, regretting what she'd said, aware that Victoria's outburst had little to do with what had happened on Christmas Day. 'Do not worry,' Lili whispered. 'I'll not breathe a word of what I've seen this night. 'Tis not my business who you choose to entertain. But honestly Victoria, a Baptist minister! Whatever would your father say?'

The words were like a floodgate raised before the tide of true emotion. 'Yes, yes - isn't it wicked?' Victoria hugged Lili with delight. 'If Father ever learned I'd brought the man into his house - a man whose purpose in Jamaica is to educate the Negroes ...' Her words became a naughty giggle; emerald eyes turned sly. 'But what concern have I for his religious calling or his work

among the slaves?' Victoria continued. 'Minister or not, he is a man, my dear. And as you see, a most attractive one.' Her fingers curved to Lili's shoulder, pressing tightly. 'Don't you love those languid eyes ... those powerful fingers ... the tiny cleft upon his chin? Believe me, Lili, underneath those pious trappings lies enormous passion. I am certain of it!'

'Victoria, take hold! For your own well-being, I implore you. Such a man would never ...'

'He is human, is he not?' With time, my dear, all things are possible. You are about to see a lady smitten by the calling of the Lord. Remember, though, 'tis I who saw him first!'

Lili's answer was prevented by the sound of footsteps rushing up the outside stairs. The women turned as Billy Austin burst into the gallery barely able to contain the rage reflected in his eyes.

'Beg pardon, ladies,' Billy drawled, aware that he was interrupting, seeming to delight in it. 'I find I've drunk the last o' the rum that I was keepin' in my cabin. Thought I'd fetch another bottle from the cellar ...' His eyes were fixed on Victoria, staring daggers.

'Why certainly, Mister Austin,' she answered airily. 'You may do quite as you like, I am sure.'

'You will do nothing of the sort!' Lili blurted, panicking as she imagined what he'd find downstairs. Regaining her composure, she continued, 'I was just about to take my leave and as you've stated, Mister Austin, 'tis such a lovely evening ... the hour's early and, I think, quite perfect for a stroll ...' She moved to loop her arm through Billy's, allowing him no leeway to refuse her. 'So sorry to have disturbed you at dinner, Victoria,' she called over her shoulder, glancing back just long enough to wink. 'I trust that we shall see each other soon and have a nice ... *long* talk?'

'*Sans doute!*' Victoria replied, grinning radiantly. Then she turned and started for the dining room, leaving Lili to her own devices.



'You've grown quite close with Miss Victoria, I see.'

'Well, yes - we seem to have a fair amount in common,' Lili answered, working hard to concentrate upon the interchange, determined to lead Billy Austin as far as she could from the house and the carriage.

'Is that a fact?' the young man mused with sidelong glances, scepticism showing clearly. 'If I might put it plainly, Miss, I surely hope that isn't so.'

'Why Mister Austin, whatever do you mean?' Lili made her best attempt to sound ingenuous, content to let him ramble on in any way he chose so long as she was able to command his full attention.

'Forgive my sayin' so, but I've observed that Miss Victoria is most inclined t'play the tease - t'plague a man with certain ... promises. No doubt there's many such as she. But you, I trust, are not like that.'

Lili knew where this was leading and she circumnavigated, turning from the challenge in his eyes as though it touched no part of her. 'Indeed, I think you do not understand Victoria. She's lived in Europe, as you know, and is accustomed to more cosmopolitan surroundings than this colony is able to provide.'

The sound of Billy's laughter mocked her. 'Come now, are ya still a child?' he said, a touch of irritation colouring the words. 'No doubt you've guessed the thing that she's about this evenin'. Don't take it wrongly, Miss. I'm not suggestin' that the reverend was blameless. But surely Miss Victoria knew very well she'd be alone this night when she put out the invitation.'

'Surely, Sir, the man's position ...'

'Makes no difference. Believe me, I know the mistress. 'Twould take a great deal more than that t'stop 'er when she's set 'er mind upon a thing.'

'Perhaps your feelings for the lady have prevented you from seeing what is so,' Lili goaded. 'Might it not be, Mister Austin, that the anger you so obviously feel has less to do with Reverend Baker's presence than with the fact that Miss Victoria does not return what would appear to be an ... avid interest on your part?'

'Well, well - perhaps *this* lady's not so unaware as she pretends,' he said with rising pleasure. 'I rather think ya know a good deal more than you'll admit, Miss Lili. Actually, with half a chance the two of us might yet become good friends.'

'I thought we were already,' Lili answered, knowing nothing could be further from the truth but preferring he believe whatever pleased him if it served her purpose.

'Might we have a drink upon it then,' he asked. 'My cabin's just beyond that hillock.'

Lili felt her instinct warning her to let this go no further, but she knew that it was still too soon, too dangerous to risk returning to the carriage. 'I thought you said that you'd run out,' she teased, still hesitant to answer him.

'Did I?' Laughing eyes belied a look of boyish innocence.

'Why, Sir, you are deceitful!' Lili told him. 'And to think that I felt sorry for you!'

'As you noticed, I was angry with the mistress. I thought I'd stir things up a bit by walkin' in upon her little tête-à-tête. But if you keep my secret I should find no reason to tell anyone that you and I have been together,' Billy said with new respect, offering his arm again.

'That, I shall agree to,' Lili answered, starting with him towards the cabin, promising herself that she was wise enough to prove his match should Billy try to compromise her.

The overseer's cottage was a one room structure, built low to the ground and badly needing paint. As she entered from the small verandah Lili was surprised to find that Billy lived with but a single table, two rude chairs with boards for seats, a cupboard that should long ago have been discarded and a bed most likely older than himself.

'Tis not the luxury yer used to, but quite cosy, don't ya think?' he said to Lili as he moved about the cubicle, lighting stubs of candles and the single lantern in the



room. 'Just one more minute an' we'll toast our friendship, proper.'

Lili smiled stiffly, glancing towards the door he'd closed. 'I think we might do with a bit more air.'

'Now now, Miss Lili. I thought we'd reached accord in that.' The man reached for a bottle and a pair of goblets on a shelf. 'It wouldn't do t'have them niggers passin' by an' seein' ya in here with me now, would it? Ya know how them blackies talk.' He filled the glasses and turned back round, extending one in her direction.

'Yes, I do suppose you are correct in that,' she answered, feeling trapped and nervous nonetheless. Quickly she attacked the drink, gulping at it, wishing to be done with this as soon as possible and able to make a safe, discreet departure.

The undiluted potency of rum flamed from throat to stomach. Lili stumbled, coughing violently, and banged against the table. The glass fell with a loud crash.

'Goodness! I can see yer hardly used t'spirits,' Billy rushed to wrap an arm around her shoulder. 'Come Miss, do sit down. 'Twill pass in just a moment.'

Lili did not have the strength to argue as he guided her across the room and sat beside her on the bed. Fighting to regain her breath, disoriented by the burning pain that raged inside, the best that she could manage was to keep the liquor from returning.

Finally, the coughing stopped.

'There now, that is better is it not? But you must drink the next more slowly.'

'Thank you, no, I do not wish another,' Lili rasped. 'With your permission now, I think it best that I be starting home.'

'But you have only just arrived,' he said as stealthy fingers crept across her shoulder. 'Surely you can stay a while longer - at least until we get to know each other...'

Lili's protest disappeared beneath the sudden pressure of his lips upon her own. She tried to move, to pull away, but strong arms clamped around her waist and held her

to him, breasts crushed painfully against the hardness of his chest.

Panicked by the thrust of Billy's tongue between her teeth she twisted sideways, grazing tender flesh.

With a yelp of pain the man released her, jumped away and gaped in anger and astonishment.

'How dare you!' Lili growled and leaped trembling to her feet.

Billy licked the blood inside his lip and glared with eyes that flashed his hatred. 'Bitch!' he snarled and moved in her direction. 'I'll show ya what these foolish pretences will bring ...'

Lili struck out blindly, slapping him across the face before she'd had the chance to think what she was doing. Startled at her own behaviour, terrified that he might hit her back, she whirled and fled towards the door.

'Go ahead - run!' he yelled behind her. 'Yer all alike, every last one o'ya! I hope ya die an' old maid, Lili Osborn! 'Tis what such cowardice deserves! If you were half the woman you pretend t'be ...'

But Lili did not hear the rest of it. She could not think of anything except escape as she ran sobbing down the steps and across the grass till she'd reached the carriage. Breathless, terrified, she climbed aboard and sent the horses trotting down the drive that led towards freedom.

A single lamp, a beacon in the darkness, flickered on the front verandah as the carriage rumbled towards the Great House. Lili did not have to look to know who would be waiting. Before the team had reached the steps she saw Mirtilla's portly shadow move behind the balustrade then take on definition as the old cook burst into the moonlight, racing towards them, calling Lili's name.

'You gots him dere?' The voice was quavering, the huge eyes moist, half mad with worry.

''Tis done, Mirtilla. Everything will be all right now,' Lili told her.

But the woman was not taking anybody's word for

frame, she hauled herself aboard and disappeared inside.

'*Bayeyere ... bayeyere!*' The word for 'favourite son', this. Searching for a foothold, clutching at the carriage Mirtilla's pet name for Tacooma, rose in swells of anguish.

'What is wrong, Mirtilla?' Lili called out as she hurried to the ground and moved to climb into the vehicle.

A face appeared inside the portal, beautiful dark features deeply troubled. 'Him not talkin', Miss,' Pomelia murmured. 'Tacooma not be movin' none. Him head fall back like him be sleepin', soon's we start to ride.'

'Hol' dere while me go roun' de udder side.' It was Bobbie, speaking over Lili's shoulder. 'Den we takes him, all togedder.'

The semi-conscious man was lowered feet first from the carriage. With tender care they brought him to the house - Mirtilla cradling his head, Bobbie struggling to support his back and shoulders, Lili and Pomelia holding up his legs.

'Come, dis way,' Mirtilla ordered as they moved into the shadows of the gallery. 'Me gots Miss Emily's room all fix. We puts Tacooma in de bed, dere.'

'But we cannot! What if someone sees him?' Lili questioned with alarm. 'Twas you who said the slaves must not find out about this.'

Mirtilla's features tightened into murderous ferocity. 'Is de fiel' slave what be risin'-up. No house gal roun' dis place be tellin' tale 'less she wan' trouble wid Mirtilla!' With that she bent to wipe Tacooma's forehead and to whisper in his ear. 'Not worry. Auntie here now an' she make Tacooma strong like when him jus' a *pickaninny*.' Then she motioned briskly for the others to continue towards the stairs.

A fire was burning in a corner of the chamber as they moved Tacooma towards the huge four-poster bed. While the others waited, Mirtilla rushed about to light the candles.

'Dear God, what have they done to him?' Lili winced, recoiling from the sight of wounds across Tacooma's flesh; the dry blood thickly matted through his hair; the wretched, swollen body bearing only small resemblance to the robust man she'd known since childhood. 'Did they ... beat him?'

'Massa Patrick pull Tacooma down de road behin' him horse,' Pomelia answered in a voice that quivered on the edge of tears.

Somewhere underneath the level of awareness Tacooma stirred and tried to turn in her direction. Halfway up he stopped and fell back to the pillow, moaning softly.

'Is done, Tacooma. You safe at Bonnaire, jus' like Pommie promise.'

He muttered something unintelligible. Eyelids fluttered and it seemed that he might waken. Then, with one long sigh, he slipped back to a safer place.

'Me brings him food. Me does de bes' me know,' Pomelia cried as if she were to blame for this.

'Is good ting what you do,' Mirtilla answered, crisp and certain as she filled a pewter basin on the washstand and began to dig for little bottles buried deep inside her pockets. 'Bes' you goin' back now, 'fore dey tink you pull foot an' de *busha* come here lookin'.'

Pomelia nodded absently acknowledging Mirtilla's sound advice. Yet all the while she lingered near the inert form, staring sadly at Tacooma, unable yet to tear herself away.

'Not you fear,' Mirtilla told her. 'Is udder time like dis when Auntie take de sickness from Tacooma. Out you now. Out you all, so she can do de ting!'

The sound of plodding footsteps echoed mournfully through empty rooms as Lili led the way back down into the lower gallery. She did not speak or look at Bobbie or Pomelia as the vision of Tacooma's sorry state spread painfully across her mind, filling her with fury and frustration, adding to her sense of helplessness and outrage.

'Me goin' back now, Missy,' a soft voice whispered as they reached the bottom, calling her attention to Pomelia standing close beside her.

'Oh no, you mustn't!' Lili answered, feeling sudden great affection for this woman, wanting to protect her also from the threat of Patrick Sloane. 'Stay the night at least and maybe in the morning we can think of something so you never need return ...' Her words trailed off distractedly as weariness made any more specific plan impossible to formulate.

A melancholy smile reset Pomelia's features as she reached for Lili's hand. 'God bless you Missy, but dat massa never lets me go. Bes' dat Pomelia do like Auntie say now, 'fore dey looks an' fin' she gone.'

Lili clasped the woman's fingers in her own. 'I don't know what to say. I have no words to thank you ...'

'Is Missy what need tankin',' Pomelia answered, lowering her eyes. 'Not much what dis poor slave can do. But *buckra*-lady save Tacooma now, for sure!'

Lili barely managed to contain herself until the sound of hinges creaking told her that Pomelia had departed. Breaking down in tears she ran past Bobbie Norton through the double doors that led to the verandah.

Curled into a wicker chair she wept as though there'd be no end to it. The anguish that she felt, the maddening tension of these past days seemed to burst upon her all at once, trouncing her illusions of fulfilment as she thought about Tacooma and Pomelia and the countless others like them suffering endlessly while she, through no endeavour of her own, had managed to escape an equal fate. How was she to live with this? How was she to reconcile a guilt from which there could be no deliverance?

The sound of footsteps close behind her left no time to wipe away the tears.

'Everything be good now, Missy. Soon you see dat woman make Tacooma strong, jus' like him always be.'

'Yes ... I know,' Lili whimpered. 'Mirtilla is quite skilled at nursing people back to health. 'Tis Mister

Sloane who angers me. Were I a man, I swear to you I'd ride to Spanish Town and make him pay for what he's done. Some way, somehow - a sword, a pistol ...' Her voice dissolved again to weeping as she sank before the inescapable injustice of the way things were.

Bobbie's hand descended onto Lili's shoulder. 'You mean dat, Missy?'

'Of course I do!'

'Den Bobbie say how Missy help so ting not stay de same for always.'

'What are you talking about?' Lili murmured, wiping her eyes. 'What do you think that I can do? I have no power, no influence to speak of that would make a difference.'

Bobbie squatted down in front of her. 'Two nights comin' is meetin' in Montego, Missy. Plenty Free Coloured comin' dere what wants to stop dis ting, what's sayin' dat de time be here for risin' up togedder.'

'But how could I be part of that? And what do you suppose would happen if a white girl dared appear at such a gathering?'

Bobbie gazed at her and didn't say a word. The look upon his face told Lili that he knew.

She glanced away, humiliated, filled with self-reproach to think that even now she'd tried to keep the truth from him.

'Not worry, Missy. Bobbie Norton right dere wid you. Is plenty what be 'fraid to speak out in de day. But no one do you harm an' no one say dey sees you dere.'

Lili hesitated for another moment, not quite able yet to see herself among a secret band of coloured rebels.

'Is de only way to change a ting,' he whispered. 'De more of us what pulls togedder, de stronger dat we be.'

There was no arguing with this and Lili felt herself give way at last.

'Very well then, Bobbie. Tell your comrades I shall join them.'

Victoria had wakened in a foul humour. She was angry with herself, angry with the world, angry that before her stretched another blistering day of emptiness and boredom that could drive a saint to madness. Seated at her mirrors, she leaned forward to appraise herself as she had done so frequently since her arrival on the island. Day-to-day exposure to this torrid climate had begun to take its toll on her complexion. There was dryness underneath her eyes, the pores in her skin had assuredly grown larger and that vulgar flush of pink across the cheeks reminding her of ripe tomatoes and over-rouged old women. Six months more of baking in this oven and she'd be a hag for certain. What man would want her then? What future would there be left to hope for with her vital juices sapped by heat and drained by those insatiable mosquitoes!

The bedroom door eased open just as sounds of disagreement rose outside her window. 'What is going on out there?' Victoria demanded of the housemaid who was entering.

'Oh Missy, Juliatt know nothin' 'bout dat ting!' the servant squeaked, beset by such a violent trembling that the china on the tray she carried bounced and clattered. 'But me brings you nice hot chocolate an' dem johnnycakes what Missy like.'

Victoria stood up and rushed to gaze out through the window. 'Heavens! There must be a dozen slaves down there! How can one think with all that clamour? Juliatt, go down at once! Tell Mister Austin he must put a stop to this immediately. I'll not permit those noisy savages to congregate beside the house!'

The housemaid set the tray down clumsily, then turned and fled, eager to escape the wrath of an indignant mistress.

Victoria picked fretfully at bits of cake and sipped the steaming chocolate, tasting neither, fixed upon the angry voices growing louder. They were much too close for comfort it occurred to her as she moved back to peek out through the louvres. Bad enough that she was tripping over Africans each time she turned a corner. Damnable that she must live beneath the same roof as her father's coloured mistress. But to suffer such intrusion from a band of common field slaves gathered right beneath her window - indeed, that was too much!

Damn that Billy Austin's eyes! How could he permit such blatant disrespect?

Victoria grabbed her wrapper from the blanket rack, thrust her arms into the sleeves and strode out of the room. She stormed across the upper gallery and moved quickly down the steps, narrowly avoiding a collision with the housemaid at the bottom.

'Me jus' comin' up dere, Missy,' Juliett defended breathlessly.

'And what has been accomplished? Have you sent for Billy Austin?'

'*Busha* not be no-place,' Juliett replied. 'Dem slave out dere all sayin' dat dey's free now, an' dey not be workin' in dem fiel' no more!'

'Indeed? Well, we shall see about that!'

As soon as she appeared on the verandah the shouting lessened to a discontented rumble and the slaves backed off a distance from the steps. Victoria felt her insides flutter as she found herself confronted by a sea of hostile faces, but she knew must not show her fear, must not let this rabble think such insolent behaviour would be tolerated.

'What is going on here?' she demanded, glaring at them. 'Why are you not working at the tasks assigned to you?'



A giant of a man stepped forward, gazing up at her uneasily. 'Beg pardon, Missy?'

'Yes, what is it? Who are you?' Victoria snapped as though she were not ruffled in the slightest by the rifle tucked beneath his arm.

'Me Cyrus, Missy, what be driver for dem fiel' gang. *Busha* say we s'pose to haul dem rock for make new wall dis mornin', but dem neggas here say dey's not doin' such.'

'We's free!' an angry voice responded from the mob. 'Mister Wilberforce is make we free!' The rest began to echo this until embittered shouting threatened to erupt into a riot.

'See you how me sayin'?' Cyrus whispered nervously when he'd rushed up the steps to stand beside Victoria. 'Is like dis now in plenty place since *buckra* tellin' 'bout de news what come from Englan'.'

Victoria smarted with exasperation at the incredible stupidity of people like her father who discussed such matters within earshot of the Negroes. But to find another reason to dislike him was not going to improve the situation now she realised. 'For goodness sake, Cyrus, is there nothing you can do till Billy Austin can be found?'

'Me, Missy?' Cyrus croaked. 'Me only 'llowed to do how *busha* say. Slave not s'posed to tink a ting himself.'

'Well how much thinking does it take?' Victoria shot back. 'For heaven's sake man, there's a rifle in your hands! Use it if you must!'

The huge man seemed to shrink. 'Oh Missy, dis jus' be for slave what pull-foot, maybe scare dem mos'ly so dey keeps on workin'. If Cyrus kill de massa's neggas, *busha* vex wid Cyrus sure - row him in de hot house, whip him plenty hard!'

Victoria had no compassion for such cowardice. 'You may be frightened, but I certainly am not!' She yanked the rifle from his grasp and aimed into the centre of the crowd.

The slaves stopped yelling all at once and edged back,

gasping, from the woman who was threatening them.

'I do not know what lies you've heard and, frankly, I don't care!' Victoria announced. 'I'll count to ten and when I'm finished you may trust that I shall shoot whoever is so foolish as to be standing here!' She cocked the hammer, squinted down the muzzle of the gun. 'One ... two ... three ...'

They fled like game birds flushed from cover, scattering across the lawn and shrieking with alarm. In moments only Cyrus stood beside her, grinning his relief.

'Missy fool dem neggas good!' He chuckled nervously.

Victoria whirled upon him. 'I wasn't fooling! If you'd half the gumption that a driver is supposed to have ...'

'But Missy, Cyrus jus' poor negga like the res'! Is *busha* what be s'pose to say dem slave.'

'Enough of your excuses!' Victoria thrust the rifle back at him. 'Go do your job and see to it those others are occupied at something useful. Otherwise, I'll have you put back in the fields among them.'

Cyrus shuddered at the thought. 'Not worry, Missy. Soon's me see dat *busha*, Cyrus say him what be happen here an' Massa Billy whip dem neggas good!'

'That won't be necessary,' Victoria replied and gestured that he move along. 'Just do as I have told you. I shall see to Mister Austin!' So saying she started down the steps, aware that there was more than this to be discussed with Billy, and the perfect time to set him straight was now.

Victoria strode past shops and stables, moving towards the overseer's cabin. As the building came into view her eyes grew narrow, her breathing quickened and her being seemed to tense in readiness for battle. Teeth clenched, shoulders squared, she climbed the wooden stairs and pounded on the door.

No response.

'Mister Austin? 'Tis I!' she yelled, banging louder. 'Open this door at once!'

Still nothing.

Victoria stood motionless, wondering where to look for him, certain that if he were someplace else upon the grounds she would have been informed of it. Seething inwardly, she turned to leave then stopped, attracted by the sound of snoring coming from behind her. Glancing left she spied a shuttered window and hurried towards it, relishing within herself the thought that she might yet repay the man who'd caused her so much trouble.

She slipped a hairpin underneath the latch and the shutter swung out easily. As she peered inside, Victoria observed that she was not mistaken. Gloating, eager, she marched back to the entrance, grabbed the handle and flung the door wide open.

No sooner had she entered than the mystery of Billy Austin's disappearance was resolved with vulgar clarity. Everywhere the stench of rum pervaded. Disarray was rampant - a chair tipped over on the floor; boots and jacket carelessly flung in a corner; broken glass beside a table leg. And if any further proof was necessary, the man himself lay dazed upon the bed, shirt and trousers stained and wrinkled, one arm dangling inches from an empty bottle.

Victoria made her way through the debris and nudged him in the ribs. 'Wake up, Mister Austin! Wake up this minute. We've got things to discuss, you and I!'

His answer was an adenoidal inhalation followed by a long and weary whistling.

Determined he would not escape her wrath, Victoria snatched up a pitcher then returned to stand above the bed. She tipped the vessel, laughing softly as the water splashed on Billy's face and brought him leaping upward, thrashing wildly.

'What the blazes ...' he began then stopped abruptly when he saw her. 'You've a fine way of helpin' a man t'start his day, Miss!' Billy pulled his shirt off, mopped the beads of water from his face and shoulders.

'Your day should have begun hours ago. A pretty state of things we have when I must rouse the overseer from a drunken stupor!'

'Any man's entitled ...'

'Spare me lame excuses,' Victoria raged. 'Tis your responsibility to see that Oxford Hall is run in an orderly and proper fashion!'

'Ain't heard no complaints so far,' Billy answered.

'For your information,' Victoria rasped, 'while you lay here sprawled unconscious, a catastrophe was narrowly avoided at the Great House. Are you aware our Negroes think that Parliament has freed them?'

'Bloody heathens!' Billy grumbled. 'Don't know where they get such notions. But a good sound floggin', thirty stripes across the back, shall end such thoughts of independence. I shall get their names from Cyrus. He will lash the fear of God into the lot of 'em afore the day is out.'

'Cyrus?' Victoria flung back. 'That mealy-mouthed excuse for a driver was right there all the while. I daresay he was useless in the face of their resistance. 'Twas myself who took a rifle up and faced that mob. Had I not threatened them ...'

'Indeed? Ya did that all yerself? Well, well, Victoria, it seems yer learnin' how t'handle trouble in Jamaica. Then again, 'tis only one more thing about ya that excites me so.' He reached in her direction.

'Stop right there,' Victoria snapped icily. 'From this day forward 'twill be *Miss Victoria* when you address me. What I've learned is that familiarity will indeed breed contempt.'

He stretched upon the mattress, rubbing hard-ridged stomach muscles. 'Why not speak the truth? Yer cross because I spoiled yer little rendezvous with Reverend Baker. Or can it be that yer jealous cause I went out walkin' with Miss Lili?'

Victoria stood rigid, wishing she could plunge her fingernails into those smug blue eyes. 'How does a man - a boy - presume to take such liberties - to burst into my home without an invitation?'

Billy stood up, smiling wryly. 'When did we return to such formality? I seem to recall several nights when my

appearance was quite welcome - indeed, when my presence in yer chamber was received with not a small display of gratitude.'

'Gratitude?' Victoria shrieked. 'You strutting lout! A few casual and passing liberties and you think the matter is quite settled? Your presumption, your conceit, are sad and pathetic. Laughable, at best!'

Billy moved in her direction, clearly unintimidated. 'Laughable?' he mocked while gazing at the rise and fall of breasts more tempting for the patch of skin revealed above the gaping bodice. 'I recall no laughter comin' from them pretty lips while I was ...'

'Beast!' she cried. 'What I have done, 'tis plain to see, is lead a boy to think himself a man! You cannot honestly believe my pretences were anything but acts of charity in order that you not lose your ability to function!'

'Yes, and being such a charitable person you managed to pretend for three nights running ...'

'Merely for convenience. But it's something which will never be repeated, you may be certain!'

'Because of the Reverend? Please, Victoria, do not tell me you have serious hopes of making him your next conquest.'

'Your jealousy is touching, Mister Austin, but believe me you'd do well to save your breath. I've no doubt Reverend Baker, or any man, could offer something far superior to the sorry waste of time that you call love-making!'

'Liar,' Billy growled, lunging forward, pinning Victoria's arms against her sides. 'Why don't we see if yer as independent as ya claim t'be. It seems it does not take so very long before the truth of things reveal themselves.'

As he spoke his free hand worked to loose the fastenings of her wrapper, setting forth the fullness of her bosom clearly outlined beneath the flimsy nightgown.

'I'm warning you,' she rasped as Billy cupped her breast and lifted it upon his palm.

'Are ya now!' He yanked the fabric downward to reveal bare flesh, soon captured in his fingers. 'Go ahead ... tell

me that ya do not care for this,' Billy teased, stroking, toying, goading her until the two of them were breathing heavily.

Victoria clenched her teeth, willing that her body not respond despite familiar stirrings rising up within her.

'If you persist in this you have my promise that the instant Father returns from Spanish Town I'll see to it that you're dismissed,' she threatened in a voice that rippled with contempt.

'Fer what, Miss?' Do you plan t'tell yer father that you've had me t'yer bed?' His touch grew stronger, more insistent, and he pressed himself against Victoria, full length. 'Just what are ya suggestin' that I'll be dismissed for?'

'For ... for ... for hounding me, pursuing me!' she spluttered, frightened by the stiffening of flesh that she could feel between them, pressing tight against her belly.

Billy laughed and backed Victoria against a wall, his lips close to her ear, sliding slowly down her silken neck. 'Oh no, Miss. Ya must be mistaken. I was only doin' m'job. Just watchin' over ya, as yer own dear father said I should.'

'What?' Victoria burst. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Exactly what ya think I do,' he answered with exaggerated innocence. 'I daresay that yer father knows 'is lass a trifle better than y'think 'e does. Had a little talk, we did, before 'e left. Said that while I was not t'go near ya, 'e was dependin' on me t'be sure that no one else did, either. Paid me handsome for the service too, if ya must know the whole of it.'

'You mean he ordered you to spy on me, and you agreed!'

'Well, ya might put it that way. But why look on it as an unhappy thing? As it turns out, matters have progressed quite nicely for the two of us. Yer father need know nothin' of our nightly visits an' you, m'dear, can have the pleasure one can clearly see ya crave.' His fingers stole down towards her belly. 'After all, Victoria, yer close t'runnin' out of choices. You've lost yer chance

with Mister Rutland, once yer father's back you'll never see that minister again, an' no one else is man enough t'suit yer fancy.' He chuckled nastily. 'Except, perhaps, the married ones who wouldn't dare t'place a hand on ya f'fear of papa findin' out. So ya see, m'girl, 'tis best ya show a proper gratitude that Billy Austin's not inclined t'hold a grudge.'

With that he let her go and slipped his hands around to probe beneath the softness of her hips.

'Is that what you honestly believe?' she whispered, barely able to pronounce the words amidst her blinding fury.

'Not what I believe, love . . . what I know,' he answered, grinning slyly as he thrust his lips between her breasts and slid his tongue towards a nipple.

Just as Billy's mouth swooped down upon its prize, Victoria's knee rose sharply upward.

With a howl of anguish Billy doubled over, sinking quickly towards the floor.

Victoria observed the man who rocked now on his knees and clutched his stomach, delighting at the sound of it each time he gasped in pain. 'You see, Mister Austin, your little attempt to blackmail me was quite short-sighted; altogether useless, I'm afraid. Were you to breathe a word of Reverend Baker's presence here I should be forced to tell my father that you've been with Lili Osborn. And were that to happen, Sir, you'd be quite lucky to escape with mere dismissal! Knowing how he feels about the lady, if Father did not kill you with his own two hands, the least he'd do is see you never found employment in Jamaica.'

'You'd do that too, I'll warrant,' Billy groaned as he rolled over on the floor.

'When necessary, Mister Austin, be assured I will do anything! And now that we have settled that, may I suggest you be about your proper business? I have other plans this day, and no intention to waste any further time upon the likes of you!' Smiling brazenly, she turned to make her exit.

'Go ahead then,' Billy growled behind her. 'Go an' find yer precious Reverend! Best the poor fool take some pleasure while he may, for, mark my words, he will not be around much longer!'

Victoria was not disturbed by Billy's empty threats. The Reverend was a man, she knew, and though it might yet be a while it could not take forever till she had what she desired of him.

Besides, a man her father disapproved of was a challenge she could not resist.

## 11

January 15, 1824  
Falmouth, Jamaica

My dear Doctor Higgens,

*It has been full three months since we took leave of each other at the Blackwall docks. I have now reached the land of sickness, sin and death where Satan rules with awful might. Religion is scorned and those who put their faith in God are mocked and ridiculed. The cause of truth is met by staunch opponents to the human sentiment from England, and there's many would rejoice if all God's servants were transported from these shores. A gloomy picture you will say, and that it truly is but for the knowledge that our Lord sitteth on His throne and all power is vested in Him. Praise be that He can moderate the rage of infidels or transform it to subserve His purpose.*

*The poor, downtrodden and most hated sons of Africa present a winsome respite from the insalubrious white population. Though many of them seem removed from nearly every rational conception, such is the magnificent simplicity of the Gospel that though ignorant they*



comprehend it and accept with love the truth as it is from Jesus. Their knowledge of the world is meagre, nor are the milder teachings of the Scriptures yet in evidence among them, for they search still for a way to shed the mantle of oppression and it will be some while ere they might be denominated other than as babes in Christ.

But let it not be thought the slave alone is wretched; the white inhabitants are far worse than the victims of their villainy. There is scarcely a chaste person to be found. Though I have been in Falmouth but a little while I have witnessed far more than is necessary to disgust my soul and find myself hard pressed to pity persons such as those who view indifferently a panorama rife with crime against the laws of God and rights of men.

In contemplating this my heart is sickened and I feel ashamed that I am of the race that perpetrates such vile atrocity. I can probably account for persons growing used to slavery and having a distaste for slaves, for they can sometimes be quite trying, for they know no other way. But it ought ever to be borne in mind that this arises from a system in which every owner must accept his share of blame.

What a blessing that to such unfortunates the Gospel can be preached - a ray of light amidst the darkness of despair. To lead these captives towards the liberty of heaven, to open prison doors for those long shut away is the most satisfying part of it, and here I dwell that I might thus be occupied. Save for this I know that nothing else on earth should tempt me to remain. We must all of us resolve to strive unceasingly towards banishing a system so corrupt, so noxious and offensive to a Christian sense of decency and justice that it must be viewed by God with manifest disapprobation.

It would truly be a blessing if the committee can appropriate some money to rebuild the school room, as the present one is totally unsuitable. The structure is located in a low place, far out of the way, and when the rain descends cannot be opened in consequence of a gully where water flows profusely and in which, a short time

past, a girl was nearly drowned. On sunny days the sand of the embankment grows so fiercesome hot to walk upon it is quite painful and the children are in danger of a serious injury were they to slip, as it is plentifully strewn with broken glass and rusty metal hoops. The room itself has nothing one could call a proper ceiling in a climate so oppressive as this is, shielded barely from the sun's incessant rays by thinnest boards or broken shingles. That alone is quite enough to threaten the health of any European, however fit and dedicated at the outset. Add to this the building is so tiny it accommodates but half of those who might otherwise be in attendance and I trust you will appreciate that my request arises not from a complaining nature, but from true desire to properly instruct the youngsters given over to my care.

The teaching of these children forms a major part of my employment in exact accordance with the leanings of my heart; and I pray my stay here be protracted that I may provide the means of turning many youngsters from the grasp of Satan unto God. It is most assuring to reflect that all our lives are in His hands and all concerns in His control. Still, when I consider others with a piety and talent so much greater than my own I sometimes wonder if it might not be the curse of vanity that leads me to presume His notice, His indulgence for my sorry efforts. Yet I realise it is also true that in His infinite power the Lord can cause the weakest to accomplish His great purpose.

It is at these times of doubting that I find my thoughts returning to my parents. In all the years I watched them toil among the swarthy sons of Africa, revealing to the natives of the Gold Coast blessed wonders of redeeming love, I never once anticipated that the honour would be conferred upon me to follow in their footsteps. Now, long after they've been taken back to God and I to a far distant land, it seems I am continuing their work among the very people they so loved - for here I find descendants of the very tribesmen preached to by my parents, stolen

from their native soil and brought as slaves into this colony.

Even so, it would appear that I am still obliged to mount the whirlwind of my own temptations and to find some way to calm the storm. We know, the both of us, that certain thoughts arising from a weakness of the flesh is my most easily besetting sin. All the while I struggle 'twixt a furious temptation and the blessed moments of a calm resolve. I doubt not that there will be times when I shall have to fight this battle more than others, occasions which perhaps occupy too much of an unhappy anticipation. Possibly, nay probably, some of these may never come to pass, but in those I may be exercised with I trust that I shall have the strength to lean upon His promise: 'I am with you always' and how thereby that I may safely trust Him for the future.

Regretfully I leave you now, for the hour grows late and there is much that I must do come morning. Although a boundless ocean rolls between us, dear confessor, we must take our consolation in the knowledge that we both are travelling towards the same heaven and that, should we meet there, separation, as with my parents, will be known no longer.

Yours in Christ,  
Andrew Baker

Andrew placed the pen beside the ink well, sprinkled sand across the page and stretched his long legs underneath the slant top desk. For many moments he remained in this position, deep in contemplation, captive of the words he'd written.

It was true. All of it. The desperate plight of these poor heathens and the urgent need to reconstruct and refurbish the mission. But even as he thought of this his mind kept turning back to one part of the letter in particular - that damnable desire that arose from being human.

Despite himself he could not help but wonder if he'd

done the right thing; if a person like himself belonged here in Jamaica.

Wearily he gazed beyond the lantern's light towards ghostly silhouettes of chairs and tables, noticing with wry amusement that the sorry state of the Mission's broken furniture was hidden in the dimness. Would that imperfections of his own were so easily concealed! If only in the night one's weaknesses could slip away among the shadows and remain there, safely out of sight until the daytime when the blessed labour of God's work demanded every bit of strength and cravings of the flesh could be submerged in honest toil.

A chill traversed his shoulders as he thought of his most recent trial. Last night he had barely managed to survive a difficult encounter, an exhausting test of his resolve and his devotion. Victoria Sloane was not an adversary to be taken lightly he had learned. She was not a woman to be easily outsmarted with convenient quotations from the Scripture. Her motives, artfully concealed behind a ladylike deportment, were quite plain. Doubtless, she'd been sent by God to test his fortitude, to press him to the very limits of a man's endurance. Thank heaven he had proved himself her equal this time, overcome the fierce desire her nearness and her willingness provoked. But were the two of them to meet again in private, Andrew could not help but wonder if he'd be so fortunate - if he'd be strong enough to come away untainted.

Indeed, in matters of the flesh he knew himself to be as much the babe, the innocent, as those to whom he ministered in matters of the soul.

A gentle knocking stirred him from reflection. Andrew wondered if he might have been mistaken. It was near to midnight. Most unlikely someone would be calling at this hour.

Again the knocking. 'Mistah Ministah? You be in dere?'

The tremolo of a woman on the edge of tears brought

Andrew to his feet. 'Yes, yes, I'm here,' he called and hurried to admit her.

A beautiful black woman huddled in the doorway, shivering despite the shawl clutched tightly round her shoulders.

'Come in,' said Andrew, other thoughts dispelled by the fear and sorrow visible across the woman's features. 'And who, may I ask, have I the pleasure of addressing?'

The stranger peered back over her shoulder before she stepped inside. 'Me name Pomelia, Sah. De slave of Massa Sloane at Oxford Hall. Me sorry to disturb de preacher when him sleepin' maybe, but is somethin' what me gots to say him an' dis be de only time what safe.'

'You are quite welcome here at any time,' he told her as he closed the door. 'But surely I cannot imagine what would bring you out at this late hour.'

At the sound of his words Pomelia burst into tears and sagged against the wall. 'Oh, Sah, you gots to say to Massa Jesus! You gots to pray Him stop de badness what Pomelia sure is soon be comin'!'

'Of course I will,' he answered, eager to console her, noting with no small degree of interest and surprise her fervour for the Lord. 'But you can see that will be difficult unless you tell me what the trouble is.'

Pomelia nodded and raised a corner of her shawl to wipe her eyes. 'Is danger here for you!' she rasped. 'Dey's comin' soon. Me sure on it! Me hears de *busha* Billy yell you name to Miss Victoria. Him plenty vex cause she be dere wid you las' night an' not wid he.'

Andrew understood and tried to hide the anger rising up within him. 'You must not let such people frighten you on my account. Those who turn their backs on God are always angered by the missionary's presence. But I promise you the Lord protects His own. I doubt that anything of consequence will come of this.'

'Oh no, Sah. Is plenty danger here for ministah!' The sparkling eyes grew wide with fear.

'Well then, you did the proper thing by coming here to

warn me. And I thank you for it from the bottom of my heart,' Andrew reached to take her trembling hands in his. 'But you must return before someone discovers you are gone.'

She dropped her gaze and pressed her lips together, nervous still, reluctant to depart.

'Is there something else?' he asked.

The woman nodded. 'Is anudder ting what Pommie hopin' dat you do.'

'Yes, yes, of course. Anything at all.'

'Me wants you pray dat Massa Jesus lookin' over on a man what's name Tacooma an' dat *buckra*-lady from Bonnaire, Miss Lili. Dey in trouble too, me tink, when Massa Patrick come back here from Spanish Town.'

The mention of Miss Lili's name awakened Andrew's interest. Last night he had sensed a difference in that woman, a humane and tender quality quite far removed from the jaded harshness of Victoria Sloane.

'Come with me,' he said, and took Pomelia's arm. 'Let us go up to the house and I will fix a pot of nice hot tea. Then you must tell me all about this before I take you back to Oxford Hall.'

'Is no need for dat. Pomelia walk back, like she come.'

'Absolutely not. I insist upon it,' Andrew said and led her towards the door.

They climbed the hill in silence, moving through the brightness of the moonlight towards the little cottage where he lived, each wrapped deeply in his own disturbing thoughts until the night was shattered by the sound of hoofbeats thundering along the road.

'Is him!' Pomelia gasped and flung herself at Andrew's chest.

Caught off-guard he toppled backward and they fell together to the ground. Huddled in the weeds they gaped towards the cottage, too frightened to move, to make a sound.

A silhouetted man on horseback galloped up behind the building. Suddenly, a burst of rifle fire lit the darkness and the sound of shattering glass exploded

through the night. Then, as quickly as he'd come the man turned round and galloped off into the night.

'Is *busha*, dere. Me sure of it!' Pomelia cried when it was safe to rise.

Andrew nodded dully, helping Pomelia to her feet. They ran together towards the house then stopped before the broken bedroom window.

'Dear lady, you have saved my life!' he murmured as he glanced at the debris. 'If not for you, 'tis likely that I would have been asleep there in the bullets' path.'

She turned to face him, looking deeply into Andrew's eyes. 'You go den? Back in Englan' where is safe for you?'

'No, no. I cannot do that. I must stay here where my work is, where I'm needed.'

'What if him come back - bring udders nex' time?' Her voice was tremulous, high pitched and thick with terror.

Andrew swallowed hard. 'We must put our trust in Him who watches over always,' he replied, the words filled suddenly with strength and clarity of purpose. For now he knew this was the answer he'd been seeking, God's way of telling him that he was not alone, that he belonged here - and indeed, he had to stay.

## 12

It was one thing to have made a promise in the heat of passion, but entirely another to sustain the courage to fulfil it.

Seated at a table on the front verandah, Lili gazed past untouched breakfast dishes, her brow shadowed with a brooding, tense disquiet. Gone was girlish innocence she realised with a touch of melancholy. Never could she view the world around her with the privileged detachment of one given over to lightheartedness and carefree

self-indulgence. Indeed, she'd put neutrality behind her at the moment when she gave her word to Bobbie Norton, pledged herself to join with others at the meeting in Montego.

Why then was she still so fretful, so uncertain? Was commitment not exactly what she'd wanted, what she needed desperately to give her life some depth and substance?

Beyond the balustrade, things seemed to be quite normal: endless rows of golden cane where stooped black bodies toiled, half hidden; smokestacks from the sugar-works beside the river belching thick grey spirals upward; the drifting scent of orange trees; the rise of purple mountains flowing inland. Yet, despite this, Lili knew that things were not as they appeared. Underneath this tranquil panorama storms were brewing, great grey clouds of anger and unrest amassing, gathering strength until that moment when like bursting thunderheads they would unleash their torrents, showering violence and bloodshed over everyone who lived upon this island, unless some change, some compromise were brought to pass before it was too late.

The thought of that impending holocaust drove Lili to her feet and down the wide verandah steps. Nervously, she moved through velvet grasses, wishing there were someone she could talk to, someone who would understand the nature of her quandary and assure her she was right to take a stand.

As though in answer to her yearning, Lili heard the sound of hoofbeats hurrying along the drive. Recognising Charles she waved, grateful for his presence yet concerned to see him back from Spanish Town so soon.

Charles nodded brusquely and dismounted, teeth clenched tightly, eyes aglow with inner fires.

'What news is there from Spanish Town?' Lili struggled to keep pace as he strode angrily towards the house. 'I hardly thought I'd see you here so soon.'

'No sense in staying, none at all!' Charles burst out, and yanked his hat off. 'The Assembly is beset by



madness, less inclined than ever to concur with England's view about improving the condition of the slaves. I have spoken till I'm hoarse but there's no use attempting reason, trying to persuade those jackasses to recognise the folly of their stubbornness. He paused and turned to her, broad shoulders sagging. 'Were you there at those proceedings Lili, I daresay you would have found yourself hard pressed as well to hold your temper, and especially when Mister Sloane addressed the House.'

The sound of Patrick's name brought shivers of revulsion as she moved beside her brother towards the breakfast table in the shade of the verandah. Within herself she felt a growing pressure to reveal what had transpired while he was gone. Still Lili kept her counsel, interested to hear what Charles would say.

'You'd think Jamaica was at war with England,' he went on as Lili set a cup before him and filled it from a china teapot. 'Sloane raves as though Parliament is calling for immediate emancipation rather than for voluntary action to ameliorate the circumstances under which our slaves are forced to live and labour. In league with those beholden to him, he's convinced the Members that to grant the Negroes greater freedoms would be setting a dangerous precedent. He insists that private property and independent local government cannot be interfered with.'

'But surely they must realise that with public feeling as it is in England, Britain will withdraw the special privileges extended to West Indian sugar interests if nothing is done to improve the lot of the Negroes!'

'Not at all,' Charles growled. 'Those fools still think their token gestures towards the slaves are not perceived for what they really are. The Members of the House are totally unwilling to concede that certain, fundamental freedoms are the due of every human being. Instead, they spend themselves unearthing petty slave conspiracies and giving them significance beyond their actual proportions.'

'And what of those of Free Condition?' Lili asked, her eyes fixed on the plate before her.

'A more complicated problem, therefore even less likely to find resolution here,' Charles grumbled. 'The legislators have chosen to disregard proposals by the Commission of Inquiry that political and civil disabilities of Free People of Colour be abolished. They hold this incompatible with the subordination and tranquility of the different classes, and refuse to realise that the time is not far distant when Free Coloureds will not rest content with anything short of what the whites enjoy. I tell you, Lili, these men hide their heads in times of crisis, hoping it will simply pass them by.'

'Twill not, you know,' she answered softly. 'Free People of Colour are organising, holding meetings ...'

'Of course I know that. The Assembly knows it too. Publicity arising from those gatherings in Kingston has increased the planters' consternation. It is feared now that word of them will reach humanitarians in Britain. With Private Privilege Bills so costly, even coloureds who can afford them have delayed their applications until the outcome of their latest petition becomes known. As a result, the House has no impressive list of these with which to placate the Colonial Department. Indeed, Governor Manchester has been forced to state that last year's session did not produce many Private Bills because the petition of the Free People has been delayed for too long.'

'And if this petition is denied ...?'

'It seems a certainty more violent actions will be taken. These people are prepared, if necessary, to abandon constitutional procedures and employ a more militant approach. Already threatening letters have been sent to the governor's secretary and the Mayor of Kingston, challenging the government to try the strength of regular soldiers against the Free People.'

'And with good cause,' Lili cried. 'The way they are oppressed is shameful, inhumane. Small wonder they

begin to band together even in the country parishes to seek reform, to show the legislators they no longer will stand mute as they are trodden upon by those very people who deny such practices exist.'

'Here now, what is this?' Charles interrupted. 'Since when have you concerned yourself with things beyond Bonnaire? Surely there's a part of you that's been concealed from me.'

Lili blushed and glanced away. 'We all must grow up sometime, Charles,' she murmured. 'Surely you cannot suppose that I would stay forever sheltered here, oblivious to life. 'Twas you, yourself, who said I must go out and see what's happening in the world. Were those just empty words? Did you not mean them?' Now she looked back, met his gaze and stared forthrightly into eyes that gleamed with new appreciation for her then grew narrow with concern.

'I sense there's more to this than you are saying.' Charles reached out to clasp her fingers. 'Tell me Lili, what have you been up to in my absence? Something's happened I should know about, I'm certain of it.'

Lili fidgeted, encumbered by the question, hesitant to bare her soul and risk his disapproval. Finally, rekindled by his patient smile, the love she felt for him rose to reassure her and to urge that she be truthful. Softly, and with halting words, she told of her acquaintanceship with Bobbie Norton and the meeting she was going to attend.

When she had finished Charles sat pale and shaken. 'So ... the Kingston Coloured Committee has made its way into the North at last,' he mused aloud. 'Can't say that it surprises me. No doubt that journalist, LeClerc, will be there seeking new recruits.' He yanked the napkin from his collar, slapped it down. 'You must abandon all this foolishness at once! Thank heaven I've returned in time to stop you!'

'Please do not demean what I am doing,' Lili answered, swallowing a rush of indignation at the way he still presumed to oversee her actions. 'Don't you see it,

Charles? At last I am beginning to appreciate my place in things, to recognise just who I am and where my energies belong. How can you ask me to ignore this opportunity to stand among my people?’

‘To what end?’ Charles challenged. ‘Have you no conception of the danger that attends such radical behaviour? They are searching now for just such people as your Mister Norton – certainly for John LeClerc! Men like Sloane are organising witch-hunts, forming secret committees in the House to ferret out those who would move against tradition. Laws are being framed to make scapegoats out of them, to punish rebels most severely, to deport those who endorse new freedoms. Do you wish to find yourself in jail, or even worse?’

‘I don’t believe what I am hearing!’ Lili rose and turned away, exasperated. ‘For goodness sake, Charles, you remind me of the very men you stand against. How, in all good conscience, can you ask me to deny my heritage and stand aside until this passes over? You advocate one course of action and advise me to pursue another. How am I to trust you? How can I believe in anything you say?’

Immediately Charles rushed to take her in his arms. ‘No no, my dear, you are mistaken,’ he insisted. ‘I am not suggesting that you live in blindness or ignore the horrors that exist around us. I am merely trying to impress upon you that by mingling openly with rebels at this time you run the risk of punishment and dishonour for your trouble. Better to move slowly, prudently, in such a way that cannot bring discovery. Can you not wait until the present tempest in the House calms down a bit? What harm is there to exercise a little patience and forbearance?’

‘What *harm*?’ she cried, and twisted free of his restraint. ‘Come, Brother, I shall show you!’

Lili grasped Charles by the wrist and tugged him indoors, up the staircase and along the upper gallery. At the farthest end she eased a heavy door ajar then stood back while he peered inside.

Within the chamber lay Tacooma, sickly, silent, wrapped in bandages upon the huge four-poster bed. Beside him sat Mirtilla, weeping softly as she pressed a fresh, damp poultice to his brow.

'This is why I cannot wait,' Lili whispered fervently as Charles gaped open-mouthed at the appalling sight before them. 'Lives are being forfeited while we discuss the pros and cons of action.'

Then, as tears of anger rose to cloud her vision, Lili realised absolutely that no matter how her brother felt, despite the hazards he foresaw, she must proceed according to the dictates of her heart.

It felt as though she'd stepped out of her own life and assumed the attributes of someone far more daring and outrageous. Lili stood before her mirror, stunned, transfixed by the stranger staring back at her. Baggy trousers gathered round the waist concealed the flare of rounded hips, a ruffled shirt and redingote the swell of bosom. Inspired, she swept the mane of jet black hair up from her neck and trapped it underneath a high felt hat, the brim pulled low down to one eyebrow. Quite fantastic! Lili thought. And yet, exactly right. Attired in Charles' clothes, with face scrubbed clean of rouge and lips unpainted, she could easily pass for a young man in the night. A madcap notion to be sure, yet far more practical than risking recognition or attracting notice as she rode into Montego Bay.

Ignoring sudden queasiness evoked by such considerations, Lili grabbed the portmanteau in which she'd packed her shoes and gown, and hurried round the room extinguishing the candles. Carefully she crept through the shadows, out into the gallery, wincing at the squeak of floorboards as she tiptoed down the stairs and then into the night ...

The village of Montego Bay was dark, deserted, silent but for distant sounds of revelry that drifted up from taverns near the harbour. Head down, features masked in silhouette, she rode through ghostly moonlight, wincing

as each hoofbeat seemed to echo like a crack of thunder through the empty streets. She went south past the parade, on to St. James' Church, then round a corner into Water Lane as Bobbie had instructed her. Hidden in the blackness there beneath the eaves of wooden shanties, Lili counted porches, searching for the eighth house on the right, the one with bright red curtains in the doorway. Just beyond it, in an alleyway, she waited trembling, breathless, nauseated by the stench of dunghills, fighting not to swoon.

'Dat you Miss Lili?' came a voice behind her.

Lili gasped. 'Oh Bobbie, yes!' she whispered, shivering with relief as a familiar form limped out of hiding, features masked beneath a broad brimmed hat. 'I thought that you might never come.'

'Me gots to go roun' by de back road near de creek. Word come dere's *buckras* lookin' out now, watchin' for dem time an' place we meet.'

'Dear God,' she breathed, her fingertips gone icy cold. 'You don't suppose there will be trouble, do you?'

'Not for udder *buckra*-man what's out a-ridin' on him fine, black horse.' He smiled approvingly at her disguise. 'Now someone sees we, someone askin', Missy say him how she goin' to dat meetin' of the Phil-har-mon-i-cal So-ci-e-ty.' He puffed his chest out, proud to have been able to pronounce it.

'What in heaven's name is that?' she croaked, confused by this unlikely declaration.

'Missy see what soon,' he answered, chuckling and confident again as he grabbed onto Lady's bridle and began to lead the way out from the dark concealment of the alley.

Their journey seemed to wind forever through an endless maze of twisting, narrow lanes, each one filthier and more cluttered than the last. All equally mysterious and foreboding. Lili chewed her lower lip and forced her eyes ahead of her, determined she would not succumb to terror as the rows of tightly shuttered portals seemed to warn of untold dangers lurking in the night. Surely it

must be her own imagination that transformed each murky corner into a hiding place where faceless enemies observed in silence, following her progress, readying themselves to leap into the open, challenge her, and strip her camouflage away.

At last they were on higher, cooler ground where squalor yielded to the more substantial properties of merchants set back from the road behind thick privets. Now she felt her breath come easier, her nervousness give way to curiosity, as Bobbie turned the horse in through a wall of hedges towards a huge and handsome house, its stone facade aglow in the candlelight that poured through tall, arched windows. Out in front, among long shadows cast by Georgian columns, carriage drivers clustered, passing round the rum.

'Evenin', massa.' A postilion in full livery came to take the reins from Lili's hand.

She did not answer, could not look directly at him as she hopped down to the ground then moved with Bobbie up the broad stone steps.

A houseman ushered them into a wide, high ceilinged gallery hung with richly woven draperies and chandeliers of gleaming, polished brass. Lili halted in the doorway, flabbergasted by the opulence that greeted her. In wide-eyed disbelief she gazed at what, but for the colorations of their skin, could easily have been a group of wealthy planters and their ladies gathered for an evening's entertainment. Men in silk embroidered waistcoats, women swathed in richly decorated flounces seemed to float suspended through the thick cigar smoke, sampling tidbits from a lavish sideboard, leaning over gaming tables, mingling with genteel conviviality along the aisles between long rows of tufted chairs.

'My goodness, Bobbie. If one didn't know ...'

'You 'spec for see all savage man an' wild ting jus' come off de ship from Guinea?' Gentle chiding tilted up the corners of his mouth.

'Well no, of course not ...' Lili faltered, blanching at

the man's perception. ' 'Tis just that I would never have expected anything so grand.'

He leaned in close to her, his tone a bond of confidentiality. 'Is some what's even gone in Englan', sen' for school dere by de *buckra*-fadder. Dem de ones can read an' write what's clerk in Kingston an' Montego. Gets de small plantation from de papa, maybe. Udders make de clothes for gentlemen, de furniture what fill de Great House, carriage for de Missy ride.'

'Oh Bobbie, I had no idea ...'

'Yes, yes. Is plenty what's Free Coloured got fine Christian house wid wife an' baby dere, pay tax same like de *buckra*, march wid him in the militia.' The note of pride in Bobbie's voice turned sour. 'An' still dey keeps him like de negga slave what's got no right to vote, what's got to hol' him tongue when *buckra* hurts him, tief from him, an' do him udder badness what dem magistrate not let him say dere in the courthouse. Time for stoppin' all dem ting, me sayin'. Time for free man pull togedder, take him gun ...'

The flow of Bobbie's vehemence was interrupted by the tinkling of a silver bell. Immediately all conversation waned and every pair of eyes turned towards a striking, dark haired woman clad in tiers of purple silk, her flawless olive skin aglow beneath the sparkling chandeliers.

'Miss Nellie Webster,' Bobbie whispered, smiling warmly. 'Gots dis house an' quadroon baby from de Admiral what come for see her all de way from Port Royal.'

'My goodness,' Lili breathed, disarmed by Bobbie's easy candour, his apparent disregard for scandal.

'Dear friends, if you would all be kind enough to choose your places, I've a wonderful surprise for you.' Miss Webster's lilting voice and beatific smile seemed to embrace the room, to unify and gently mobilise her guests into a willing state of sweet compliance.

'Where do you suppose she's learned to speak so



beautifully and to comport herself as well as any proper Englishwoman?' Lili whispered as she side-stepped after Bobbie down an aisle.

He glanced at her, incredulous, the wry expression on his features gently mocking. 'Her papa be dat barrister what own t'ree fine plantation in Westmorelan' Parish,' Bobbie answered. 'She him favourite dey say, what him sen' back in Englan' where dey teaches her dem ting same like she *buckra*-datter. Is plenty gal, no different from de fine white lady 'cept for dey's mulatto. Why you tinkin' all de English man come roun' for see dem when de Missus back-a-home?'

His words, the simple and straightforward logic in them, made her feel ashamed for having asked such naive, vulgar questions. Lili sat down quietly, disgusted by her own display of tactlessness, aware that she especially should have acquired far greater sensitivity by now towards those of inter-racial parentage.

When everyone was seated Nellie Webster spoke again. 'This evening, ladies and gentlemen, the Philharmonic Society of Montego Bay is gratified indeed to welcome four most talented musicians who have graced the finest halls of London with their rich interpretations of ...'

The words, the voice seemed to retreat into obscurity as Nellie Webster's gaze reversed its course, slid back across the row towards Lili, locked and held. Through agonised, interminable moments Lili felt herself consumed by smouldering eyes that seemed to twinkle with a brighter light of recognition; the awareness, surely, of one woman for another. The hat - of course! She'd dared not take it off lest waves of silken curls come tumbling from beneath it! Turtle-like, she slid down further in her seat, her shoulders hunching towards her ears, her pulses racing, palms gone moist. Within herself she wrestled with the urge to flee, the dread awareness that she'd been found out and was about to pay severely for this amateur and pitiful attempt to venture into unfamiliar territory. But then, just as she felt the terror closing up her throat

the eyes moved on, away from her. Miss Webster's voice returned and once again the room came back into perspective.

Safe for now, the panic ebbing, Lili glanced about, perplexed, disoriented, unable to absorb what she was witnessing. This was hardly the clandestine gathering of her anticipation. Instead of militant Free Negroes racing round demanding vengeance, a quartet of stately looking Englishmen appeared; two violins, a cello and viola. The musicians moved slowly towards a makeshift stage where wooden stools and music stands stood ready to accommodate them. A flutter of applause, the settling of bodies into comfortable positions, servants lowering the chandeliers and snuffing out the candles and then the strains of *Rule, Britannia!* floated through the gallery.

Unable to endure this, to abide the maddening suspense a moment longer, Lili leaned towards Bobbie, tapping him upon the shoulder. 'When?' her trembling voice implored.

A finger flew up to his lips in warning; dark eyes urged attention towards the far end of the room. 'Watch dere, near de side door,' Bobbie whispered.

Lili turned and squinted through the dimness, straining to discover what he'd meant. At first she could see nothing. Then she noticed movement in the gloom. Dark figures were rising, inching surreptitiously along a wall into oblivion beyond a shadowed portal.

Instantly she yearned to join them, but a hand upon her forearm held her in her place. 'Me say you when. Hol' still now. Make fe listen to dem song.'

A fiddle's plaintive tremolo reverberated through the air as if the violinist had perceived her longing, captured it and flung it out into the world to haunt her. Lili shivered, swallowing hard, aware that just behind the door a turning point awaited. Behind the door revelations hovered bound to prove her worth, so too did the means by which the whys and wherefores of her life might find expression and transform, at long last, all

those useless good intentions into action.

But how much longer must she sit here passively and watch the others go before her?

Slowly Lili came to recognise a pattern corresponding to Miss Nellie Webster's seemingly unpremeditated amblings round the room. Enthralled, she watched her pause beside a row of chairs as though engaged by some complex and artful passage in the music. Surely there could be no doubt about it; every time she raised a slender hand to pat her hair, adjust a ribbon on her sleeve, another silhouette would rise and brave the darkness.

Minutes seemed to stretch into a lifetime as the woman eased her way along the far side of the room, across the rear, and finally into the closest aisle. Dry mouthed suddenly, her insides quaking, Lili gripped the edges of her chair and stared straight forward, frozen, rigid, certain that her legs would buckle under her the moment that she tried to stand.

Strong fingers pressed round her own as Bobbie whispered, 'Now!'

Woodenly, mechanically, she rose with him and followed Bobbie down along the row. Positive that every pair of eyes was focused on her, certain she would faint if she so much as missed a single step, she held her breath and forced one foot to go before the other, up the aisle, around the back and down the endless miles that led into that black abyss.

On the other side a narrow passage spiralled downward towards the cellar. Lili moved with caution, keeping close beside the rough stone wall, her nostrils flaring as a sudden dampness thick with musty, pungent earth smells rose to cool her burning cheeks. Eagerly she craned her neck to look ahead of Bobbie, mesmerised by the firelight dancing at the bottom of the steps and the sounds of voices coming from around the bend.

The moment that she stepped into the subterranean retreat she felt the tension, a palpable force, a quiver in the air around her. Here there was no pretence, no attempt to mask the true emotions that had brought Free

Coloureds of Trelawny and St. James together at the risk of life and limb. Huddled in stone archways, clustered in the glow of flickering lanterns, men with worried faces spoke in urgent whispers, glancing furtively about as though at any moment they expected to be routed from this hiding place and forced to battle. Spotting Bobbie several of them turned, seeming to relax a bit and called to him with smiles of recognition.

*'Bobbie Norton, welcome!'*

*'Aye, there's a good fellow!'*

*'Now, but for LeClerc, the gathering's complete!'*

Fascinated, Lili watched as halcyon men with limbs intact paid homage to her friend, as though aware of things about him not yet known to her. Indeed, he seemed to straighten up, to strengthen at the sound of it and metamorphose into a taller, more commanding version of himself. No longer tentative and retiring, Bobbie moved with confidence from group to group, addressing everyone by his christian name, introducing Lili as 'Dat lady from Bonnaire!' And equally miraculous was how the others greeted her - not with suspicion or disdain for her disguise but with sincere, enthusiastic gladness that another comrade was now to be counted in among the fold.

A rustling of silk, the sharp transference of attention, told her that Miss Nellie Webster had just come downstairs. Lili turned and watched as others hurried from the shadows, circling round the woman, voices eager and intense. '*LeClerc? LeClerc?*' they pressed. '*Has there been any word of him?*'

She lifted up her palms to fend off their persistence. 'Sentries have been posted on the roads as far as Bogue and Ironshore. They each have his description, so we simply must be patient for a while longer.' As she spoke her interest crossed the room, soft features sharpening with purpose. Slipping gracefully beyond the group she hurried closer to where Lili stood. 'Mister Norton, you're the last one to arrive.' Her smile went limp about the edges as her eyes searched Bobbie's worriedly. 'Perhaps

you've seen a short man, light skinned, wearing great mustachios and mutton-chops?'

'Is no one dere in Water Lane or all de way roun' Cooper's Hill 'cept maybe dem what's got a cause for hidin'.'

Lili felt her heart leap in her chest at Bobbie's words. So it had not been her imagination after all! He had seen them too, those figures hidden in dark places, peering out into the night. But were they friend or foe - Free Coloureds stationed on the road or white men keeping watch for passing strangers?

'... an' dis fine "gentlemen", Miss Lili Osborn ...'

Bobbie's words cut through her thinking, bringing Lili back to here and now.

'Of course. Hello, Miss Osborn. Welcome.' Nellie's hand reached out for Lili's fingers, felt the clamminess of tension. 'Do not be unduly frightened,' she encouraged. 'We have gathered here before. The coachmen out in front are keeping watch, along with lookouts in the village. They will surely warn us should the likelihood of an intrusion come about. You've only then to go upstairs and take a seat, as though your purpose here were merely to enjoy some music.'

'I had brought along more suitable attire,' Lili said, her manner turning sheepish as she recognised her oversight. 'But in the flurry of arrival I'm afraid I've left my portmanteau tied to the horse's saddle. If you'd point the way, Miss Webster, I shall fetch it quickly, just in case ...'

'No need to venture out into the stables,' Nellie said and looped an arm through Lili's. 'We are almost equal size. I'm certain there is something in my closet that will suit you.'

Lili was about to thank her when a sudden clattering of boot-heels over stone drew everyone's attention towards the cellar steps. A breathless silence, then great cheers of greeting as a man with formidable whiskers dashed upon the scene as though pursued by demons. Horror-struck it seemed, he gaped about, undone by the

tumultuous response to his arrival. Recovering at last, he bolted for a nearby table, fished some papers from an inside pocket of his coat and spread them nervously upon the dusty surface.

'Hardly the appearance you'd expect of someone who has written such inflammatory pieces in the *Journal*,' Nellie whispered, grinning with amusement.

The little man gazed solemnly around the chamber drawing everyone into his confidence with honest eyes. 'We must be brief!' LeClerc began, the fortitude and passion in his tone dispelling any doubts engendered by that first, unfortunate impression. 'Friends in this community inform me that my presence here may have attracted the notice of our local adversaries.'

At once the unity, the solidarity of purpose in the atmosphere disintegrated.

*'Are they coming here?'*

*'Have you been followed?'*

Voices shrill with panic ricocheted around the room, one breaking in upon another till LeClerc's own words were hopelessly obscured.

'Stop dis yellin'!' Bobbie Norton's outcry rose above the din like thunder, startling everyone into uneasy silence. 'Not we come fe listen on dis man what risk him own life bein' here? Hol' back you worry now. Dem udders lookin' outside say we if de *buckra* come.'

Reluctant affirmations of the man's good sense replaced the discord. Once again the others pressed in tightly round LeClerc, who nodded gratefully towards Bobbie, cleared his throat, began anew.

'I am sorry to report that Spanish Town informants tell us there is little chance of our petition passing through. Although we seek at this time abolition of but three laws limiting Free Coloureds - those forbidding us to vote, to sit on juries, and to be employed on the estates of white men - it would seem we are to be denied these, once again.'

*'The House will never legislate on our behalf.'*

*'What good is there to hope for now?'*

LeClerc held up his hands for order. 'They are frightened of us,' he explained. 'The Governor, himself, speaks of "dread innovation which pervades the country". He views it as a harbinger of revolution not unlike the devastation of St. Dominigue. The House has outlawed publication of our petitions in the newspapers. Prejudice is so enormous even those few Members secretly in sympathy with us must be extremely careful. Any indiscreet expression of a favourable attitude could ruin a political career.'

'We gots to fight! We gots to stop dem!' Bobbie's rage reverberated through the cellar once again. 'Is time we pull togedder maybe wid dem slave what burn de Great House, kill dem *buckras* what be killin' coloureds!'

Angry rumblings of agreement hailed the coming of revolt. 'No, no my friends. That's just what I am here to counsel you against,' LeClerc insisted. 'We must stand together it is true, but in a peaceful, more effective way. If we start burning, looting, we shall lose the sympathies of those who speak for us in England. Brutality will only add more impetus to that insufferable argument that coloureds are incapable of civilised behaviour.'

'Den what you sayin' we to do!' yelled Bobbie. 'How we gets dem ting dey holdin' back in Spanish Town?'

'You anticipate me well, sir. I was just about to answer that.' LeClerc gazed down along the line of tight expressions, making contact, drawing people even closer to him with a softer voice. 'The crucial thing, our most decided hope of victory, lies in our willingness to band together - not in violence, mind you, but in a legal, orderly display of singlemindedness. Our actions can no longer be confined to Kingston and St. James. Committees of Free Coloureds must be formed in every parish and recruiters sent out to the country areas to organise the local groups and choose among them representatives to bring reports to Kingston and return with news of late developments.'

'I know of one such group that meets in secret at Mosquito Covel' a voice called out.

'And one near Dolphin Head!' another added.

'Wonderfull' LeClerc replied. 'Then they must step into the open. It is time for it!' He slapped his palm against the table top. 'Already, resolutions in the House of Commons have declared the British Government's intention to abolish slavery. What more auspicious sentiment could we desire in furthering our own cause?'

'But dem men in Englan' tink we truly free now, only slave de one what suffer.'

'Just my point,' LeClerc shot back at Bobbie. 'Publicity and visibility are what we need. We must reveal ourselves to them as one, united group desiring redress of our grievances. If we draw notice to our plight, but in a peaceful manner, the philanthropists in Britain must direct their thoughts as well to our condition. Pressure from the Mother Country shall then reinforce our own attempts to press for greater freedoms here.' LeClerc leaned forward, staring hard at Bobbie, both men locked in an impasse while the rest looked on, awaiting resolution.

Slowly, perceptibly, the tension eased from Bobbie's body, his expression turning gentler, more reflective in the wake of comprehension. 'Me 'spec you smarter fella den poor Bobbie Norton. Never read an' write, not go in Kingston, talkin' wid dem people what knows all dem ting 'bout Englan'. Say me what be bes', what help de Free Man in dis country, an' me do so.' Suddenly his eyes lit up, imbued with savage fury. 'But if someone hurts de peaceful man, if *buckra* t'row LeClerc dere in de workhouse, Bobbie Norton an' de udders here jumps up an' fights dem, sure!'

A roar of vigorous agreement seconded the ultimatum.

Nodding, smiling, John LeClerc reached out across the table, offering his hand. 'In truth, you are a credit to us, Mister Norton,' he declared. ''Tis just such willingness as yours to first proceed by peaceful means that will not only set a fine example for our brethren, but undoubtedly convey our message clearly back to England. Now, let us review this map of neighbouring



parishes and choose among ourselves those who will visit each and organise the rest who share our goals.' He smoothed the papers he had brought with him upon the table, then stepped back so everyone could have a closer look.

The eager clustering of bodies round the map was interrupted by a shrill cry of alarm. 'Dey's comin'! *Buckras* ridin' from de village!' The postilion who had taken Lili's horse rushed wildly down the steps, great rivulets of perspiration dripping from his cheeks. 'Dey's ridin' up in Water Lane wid guns!'

The room exploded into havoc with people pushing, shoving, scrambling over one another in a frenzied dash to reach the staircase. Nellie Webster cried out in the mayhem, begging others not to panic, but to no avail. The rush continued, mindless of the consequences, blind to everything but overwhelming, desperate need for flight.

Swept up in the commotion, Lili struggled not to lose her balance, not to panic as the force of the stampeding mob propelled her towards a cellar wall. Trapped there against rough stonework, battered mercilessly by bodies crowding past, she searched for Bobbie, shrieking his name. An arm reached out, encircled her, and turned her round against the tide of motion. Desperately she clung to Bobbie, cowering behind him while he used his shoulders as a wedge to clear a path until, at last, they stood free of the mainstream.

'Missy be all right?' His eyes fixed upon her ashen face as Lili worked to catch her breath.

'Of course she is!' Miss Webster, suddenly beside them, reached for Bobbie's arm. 'Come quickly now, there is another exit. You can get out this way!'

Lili staggered forward, numb with terror, concentrating on the reassuring strength of Bobbie's fingers clasped around her own. Suppressing an instinctive urge to burrow deep into a darkened corner and to hide there, she compelled herself to follow as Miss Webster led the way past piles of packing crates, around a wood bin to a

storage room located at the far end of the cellar.

'Help me with these, quickly, Mister Norton!' Nellie said as she attacked a hill of chairs and tables stacked high up into a corner.

A wooden door built low down to the ground appeared behind the unused furniture. 'This tunnel leads outside, behind the house,' Miss Webster said. 'Tis only sixty feet beyond then, till you reach the stables. Go now, hurry. I'll seal the door behind you.'

'Bless you, Missy,' Bobbie said and ducked into the darkness.

Lili froze, unable to proceed.

'Now now, my dear. We must not lose our confidence while there is still so much to do.' Miss Webster placed a kiss on Lili's cheek. 'Fear not, you are in good hands. Mister Norton will take care of you. Godspeed!' With that she reached for Lili's hand and guided her into the narrow passage.

Outside a peaceful, star-filled night was shattered by the sounds of pandemonium. People raced hysterically in all directions, voices shrilly calling out the names of drivers, loved ones. Horses whinnied, reared in terror; carriage axles, leather bindings screeched beneath the unaccustomed strain.

'Miss Lili, come; de horse be dis way!' Bobbie yelled in order to be heard above the hubbub. Getting no response he grabbed for Lili's hand and tugged her after him.

'We shall be caught, I'm sure of it!' she cried and stumbled, slipping on the dew-slick grass.

He spun around and caught her by the shoulders just in time. 'Is no one stop de *buckra*-man what's come-a-town!' he growled. 'You gots to finish up de ting; ride out from here same how you come!'

The urgency and power in his voice seemed to reactivate her own ability to function. Lili nodded, rising from beneath her cowardice and drawing stamina from eyes that begged her to survive. Revitalised, she ran with him across the open space, around the others in their path, behind a carriage and into the wooden stable.

She sagged against the doorframe, panting heavily as Bobbie raced inside in search of Lady. Hideous thoughts whirled through her mind, horrendous visions of her capture and imprisonment. There was no telling what might happen, Lili knew, were men like Patrick Sloane to find her in this place and realise she'd been living all her life among them as a white woman.

'Ready, Missy?' Bobbie called as hollow sounds of hoofbeats crossed the wooden flooring.

Lili turned to see him stooping slightly, fingers laced together, offering a leg-up towards the saddle.

'Make like nothin' special happen when de Missy ride down t'rough de town,' he said as Lili swung herself astride. 'Not run de mare, not sneak roun' t'rough dem alley.'

All at once she realised that he meant to send her off alone. 'Please, Bobbie, take the horse's reins and lead her,' Lili begged.

'No Missy. Bes' if dere no coloured man wid you.'

'And what of your own safety?' Lili groaned. 'You cannot run upon that leg!'

He looked away.

'If you're not coming, I shall not go either,' Lili cried. 'I cannot, Bobbie. Please do not abandon me.'

'But Missy, if dey sees we bot' togedder ...'

'We shall manage somehow. I am certain of it. But we must not stay here any longer!'

Fearful eyes searched out her own and, finding absolute insistence, Bobbie nodded, moved to Lady's head and took the reins.

He led her round behind the stable, past the smokehouse and through a break between the hedges to a lightly travelled road no wider than a cow path. Sick with apprehension, shirt and underlinen drenched in sweat, she dug her fingernails into her palms, preferring pain to the harsher, more excruciating torment of imagination. Slowly, as the overhanging branches swallowed them in darkness, Lili heard the sounds of riot softening behind her. She felt relief wash over her and

alleviate the drumming in her skull as Bobbie turned a corner, wound his way along a hill and down onto another road well west of those most likely to be guarded.

'Halt!'

The man's voice cut clean through, a sabre to the heart, no less a threat to life than if he'd truly plunged the dagger.

'You, Sir! Where ya goin'?'

'Massa goin' back in Falmout' to him own plantation,' Bobbie answered as a group of shadows fanned across the path with muskets gleaming.

'Falmouth's that way,' said the leader, pointing eastward. 'You were headin' fer the Bay. What kind of simpleton d'ya mistake me for? Besides, it was the lad I questioned, nigger, not yerself!'

From somewhere deep inside her there arose a primal energy, a force beyond her own control committed, absolutely, to survival. Disembodied suddenly, she seemed to view this from a distance, to observe herself as she sat straight up and responded in her deepest, most authoritative voice. 'I've business here in town, Sir, though I cannot see why that should be concern of yours.'

The man rocked back upon his heels and squinted up at her through shadow. 'Tis all of our concern when there's Free Coloureds plottin' mischief in the neighbourhood. Yer name, boy?'

'I would rather not reveal it.'

'Indeed? Then would ya be so kind instead t' name the business that a lad would be about at this late hour?'

Her tongue seemed to expand, to thicken in her throat until she thought she'd choke upon it. 'My business,' Lili answered archly, 'is of a personal nature, such that gentlemen do not discuss with other gentlemen.'

The leader stepped into a shaft of moonlight, narrow eyes fixed on the portmanteau attached to Lady's saddle. 'Personal business, eh? That would not be supplyin' guns t' coloureds would it?' He stepped forward, reaching towards the bag.

'I warn you, Sir, I shall not suffer you to rifle my belongings. I have nothing that could be of any interest to you.'

The man glanced backward past his shoulder. Others shuffled closer through the darkness, muskets at the ready. 'We shall see about that,' he continued, opening the pouch. 'Here now, what's this?' He pulled the gown half out into the open. 'Have I caught a lad who wears women's clothing?'

Lili's mind raced frantically to find some explanation. 'Counfound it, man! Must I explain in detail and before a dozen others what this gown is for? Have you no brain at all?' She leaned down, pushed his hand away from it. 'You noticed well enough that I was riding towards the Bay. Can you not guess my destination? At this hour of night who would I bring such presents to?'

The stranger paused in thought then seemed to stagger sideways, head thrown back in laughter. 'Certainly, I see it now! But why a gown?' He winked at Lili, chuckling slyly. 'Did ya not suppose that coin would be enough to buy a harlot's favours?'

'I must tell you I have no idea,' she answered softly, feigning backwardness. 'This is my first experience with such activity. I daresay, if Father knew I'd sneaked out of the house, or that this slave is leading me to that particular establishment ...'

'Enough. I understand,' the man said as he stuffed the gown back into place. 'You need explain yerself no further. Sorry t'have caused ya this embarrassment, but with circumstances as they are I trust y'understand ...'

She did not answer him, could barely keep the turmoil raging through her from erupting into view. Instead she yanked the horse's head around and put her heels to Lady's flanks. The chattering of teeth and pounding of her heartbeat hidden, mercifully, beneath the sound of cat-calls coming from behind.

As soon as she had trotted out of earshot Lili stopped the horse beside the road and waited there for Bobbie. Seeing him, she burst into a fit of laughter, giddy,

disconcerting giggling that dissolved in moments to the throaty groanings of relief.

'We safe now. Missy do dat fine, jus' fine.' His tone was sombre but his eyes shone bright with tender feeling as he reached for Lili's hand. 'Not cry no more. Is safe now.'

'What if there are others?' Lili rasped. 'Oh Bobbie, what are we to do? I could not go through that again!'

He nodded, thoughtful for the moment. 'No worry. Missy come wid Bobbie now. Him takes her where no *buckras* tink fe lookin'.'

Lili did not have the energy to question, barely noticed as he led the horse through narrow sideroads, circling, doubling back, but always moving downhill, nearer to the water. It wasn't till they'd turned into an airless alleyway that Lili realised she was back in town, close to the place where they had rendezvoused initially.

'Come, Missy. Here.' He raised his hands to help her from the saddle.

Lili glanced about, recoiling at the sight of garbage strewn about them and the sounds of tiny feet retreating through the dimness. 'Where are we going, Bobbie? What is this?'

'Is where me live,' he answered, nodding towards a wooden shack that listed like a beached ship on its rotting stilts. 'We hide de night in dere.'

'How can we? What about your mother? Surely, she will think ...'

'She sleepin' now. No talk, jus' follow,' he admonished, handing her down to the ground.

They moved through darkness as he led the horse into a shed down at the far end of the alley. Clutching Bobbie's hand for courage, Lili tiptoed with him back towards the house, then watched him slide a window open, drop the portmanteau beyond and scramble in ahead of her.

'Come, Missy. Quick now!' Bobbie's hands reached back across the sill to find her and to help her make the climb into a tiny, cluttered room.

The sounds of shutters being latched behind her and a

sudden warm, embracing darkness indoors seemed to loose the flood of tension waiting to burst free. Lili cupped her palms across her mouth and pressed her forehead to the wall, her sobs like strangled cries for help that, once begun, would not abate.

'Not cry, Miss Lili, is all good now,' Bobbie whispered as he hurried over to drape an arm around her shoulders.

But she could not stop herself, could not control the torrents of emotion tearing at her heart. Trembling violently, she leaned against him, trying to hide her face against his chest.

Gentle fingers reached to lift the hat away, to stroke the soft hair tumbling free. 'We fool dem, Missy,' Bobbie comforted. 'No need for cryin' now. You Bobbie not let no one hurt you. No one, never!'

'Oh Bobbie, I was so afraid that we were going to be shot.'

'No cause for such.' He reached into his belt and lifted out a shiny object. 'Bobbie gots him gun dere, ready all de time you sayin' wid dat *buckra*. If him touch de Missy, make for hurtin' her ...'

She looked up, startled, comprehending with heart-stopping clarity that he'd been ready to lay down his life for her. A shaft of moonlight through the shutters fell across his eyes revealing the adoration there, the yearning and the fear to voice a thought so close now to the surface, so intense that she could almost hear it sounding in the air between them.

'Oh, Bobbie, Bobbie dear,' she cried and suddenly their lips were pressing tightly, bodies touching full-length, saying things they'd dared not speak aloud.

He swept her up into his arms and carried her towards a rumpled bed. Senses reeling, Lili did not stop to think or question. Eagerly she drew him downward with her, unwilling to surrender, even for a moment, the protection and assurance of his body next to hers.

He cried out hungrily, his fingers moving to her breast then hesitating, asking, waiting for permission.

Her response was instant, unequivocal. She hugged

him tighter, whimpering with the urgency of overwhelming need as flesh and spirit told her that at last the time had come to give herself, to give her all, to be a woman for this man.

Then clothes were sliding from her body, from his own, and Lili was adrift in wonderful, new sensation, revelling in his touch, aware of Bobbie gathering her to him, loving her and leading her to heights of ecstasy she'd never dreamed were possible.

## 13

The screech of macaws heralded the dawn. The sound was adamant, demanding, filled with life and eagerness to start a brand new day.

Tacooma sighed and rolled away from beams of sunshine poking through the louvres, clinging to his dream, unwilling to relinquish memories of long ago and moments closest to his heart. In fantasy he was a child again and running barefoot and half naked through the slave village of Bonnaire until he reached the hill where he could gaze beyond the canefields towards the distant, violet mountains. Waist deep in the guinea-grass, he strained to see across the broad savannah, watching for the lines of people coiling snake-like through the canebreak, listening for songs of Africa, the music of the old land bearing weary bodies homeward from the day's relentless toil.

On tiptoe he would stand, aquiver with anticipation almost too intense to bear until the drivers had unlocked the leg irons, looped the chains across their saddles and galloped off in the direction of the Great House. Then, amidst the tumult of a hundred workers breaking ranks he'd run to where his father stood and leap with wild



exhilaration into *Tata's* strong embrace. With tiny fingers clasped behind the man's strong neck, the boy was carried back into the village towards his favourite time - the evening hours when, after supper, he would sit between his parents gazing at the cookfire's glowing embers till his eyelids grew too heavy to support and sleep would overtake him.

The sweetness of those days gone by, the vision of his parents still alive and close beside him stirred a longing deep within *Tacooma's* heart. Yearning for the safety of the past he struggled in his mind against awareness of the present: fresh, clean sheets against his flesh, the softness that could only be a *buckra's* bed. Disoriented, half asleep, he straightened out his legs, surprised to feel their heaviness, their stiffness as he pressed his toes against the footboard. Then, as muscles twitched in painful spasm and the ache of lingering bruises throbbed along his flesh, the ugly truth of what was real came rushing up to drive away the joy and press his drowsy smile into a tight-lipped frown.

The sound of floorboards creaking, footsteps moving stealthily outside the door made him sit up in the bed, alert, awake, his pulsebeat quickening with expectation. At once all other thoughts dissolved as in his mind he saw *Pomelia's* face, recalled the rapture of her velvet touch, the tender ministrations which, undoubtedly, had saved his life.

'*Tacooma* ... you asleep in dere?' *Mirtilla's* voice, a gentle whisper as the door eased open and the old cook's smiling face appeared.

He felt the grin upon his own congeal, his shoulders slump. 'Me doin' fine dis mornin',' he announced then glanced away, embarrassed by his disappointment, fearful she might think him unappreciative of her attentions.

'Not look so sad an' *winji*,' she went on good-naturedly. '*Mirtilla* got surprise here for *Tacooma*.'

'Auntie *Fushabah!*' he cried and stretched his arms in

welcome towards the tiny figure hurrying across to him. He hugged her to his chest, his vision clouding as he felt the frailty of age revealed in skin and bone. 'Me plenty glad for see you Auntie, after all dis time.'

'Up dat window now!' she called out to Mirtilla. 'Make for Auntie look him better.' She studied him with penetrating eyes seeking every nuance of Tacooma's face, the man behind it. Gnarled fingers touched his cheeks and the tender swelling round the jawline. 'Dey hurts you bad. Dat *buckra*-devil beats me baby.'

'Not so bad. Is better now. Me feelin' strong, more fit each day what pass.'

The woman nodded, seeming to accept this. Then she reached into a pocket and lifted out the medallion he had sent with Lili. 'Auntie knows Tacooma comin' back.' She draped the leather thong round his neck. 'She sayin' so de whole time what him gone.' Her scrawny chest enlarged with satisfaction. 'All dat ocean not enough for keep Tacooma from him own.'

'Is so,' he answered honestly, remembering how he'd never felt quite right to be so far away.

'An' now him come back in Ashanti Town where him be safe and where *buckra* never fin' him, never hurts Tacooma one more time.'

He stiffened, wanting to agree with her to please her; miserable because he couldn't. 'Gots to hol' here jus' a little, bes' for watchin' Juba-Lili,' he replied, his smile a sorry imitation of the woman's pure delight.

Fushabah perceived the lie at once, the pupils of her eyes contracting into pinpoints of suspicion. 'What you mean?' the old voice crackled. 'All dem year you say me how Tacooma wan' to lead him people, take him Auntie place. Cubina ol' now, Cuffee, Quaco Thombo, too. Is no one auntie trus' de same for leadin' de Ashanti in dem mountain.'

He turned his head away for there was bitter truth in what she said. So many years he'd waited, needing her to trust him, wanting her to share the power that she

wielded in the secret mountain village. Now that she was willing finally and had offered him her greatest gift, he was unable to accept.

'Me gots to stay here,' he repeated, shrinking from the condemnation in her icy stare. 'Me free man now, not slave what pull-foot, hide dere in dem hill.'

'*Buffuto! Coco-head!*' she cried. 'Tacooma wan' dat *buckra* snatch him up anudder time an' hurt him plenty - kill him, maybe? Bes' him comin' back wid Auntie till him thinkin' straight.' She stopped, her head cocked to the side. 'Is somethin' else Tacooma not be tellin'. Say me!' Bony fingers bored into the muscles of his upper arm.

'Is somethin' what Tacooma gots to do. A ting him finish firs'.'

'Auntie 'spec so! Knows Tacooma gots him plan in dere for hurtin' back dat massa, yes?'

He glanced away, not wanting to mislead her, hating to lie but knowing that he must. He nodded.

'Is foolish what you tinkin'! Not you finish wid dat badness, fightin' wid dem *buckras*, catchin' bullet from dem gun?' Her features seemed to break apart, to tumble through configurations of distress and sorrow. 'Please, *bayeyere*. You Auntie beggin' you. She not be comin' here dis day all by her own. Is *Nyankupon* what say she 'bout de ting, sen' red eye dog what's howlin' in de night for warn 'bout trouble comin' 'less Tacooma be where no one fin' him for a time. You gots to go wid Fushabah, you gots to listen.'

'Auntie, please, you hear me sayin' you?'

'Is nothin' change!' Is same like always!' she exploded, pulling back, away from him. 'De hard-eye *pickney* nebber good. Unmannersable an' disrespec'ful on him Auntie!'

Invective poured upon him punishing him as though he were a boy again, the volatile, unmanageable youth whose dreams of glory as a fierce Ashanti warrior were constantly in conflict with *Okomfo's* patient, more conservative approach. With all his heart he longed to

tell her that the reason for her disappointment, the disloyalty she thought she saw was not as it appeared. However, knowing her, he kept his silence, suffering quietly as she continued to berate him. She was close to tears when finally she grasped Mirtilla by the arm and walked away, disgusted.

Tacooma stared out through the window, desolate, regretful, knowing she would never have been able to condone the reason for his staying. How could he have told the truth? How could he have made *Okomfo*, priestess, most exalted of Ashtanti dignitaries, understand that he had found a woman whom he loved? A woman dedicated to the white man's god.

Tacooma waited till Mirtilla's footsteps and the angry mutterings of Fushabah had disappeared. Uncomfortable and depressed, he tried to force the echo of the woman's fury from his mind, regretting what he'd had to say and wishing he had found some means by which to circumvent her wishes without causing pain. Yet even as he thought it, Tacooma realised there was no way to turn his back on what he knew or close his heart to feelings he had never guessed would come to him. Without the slightest warning, something deep inside had changed. His course was clear, his purpose unmistakable. Pomelia saved his life. Now he must do the same for her.

The thought of seeing her again, of being close to her was more compelling than the pain of bruises as he moved into the upper gallery, heading for the staircase. Carefully, he made his way down to the morning room, unnerved by every voice, each set of footsteps as the house slaves woke and set about their duties. He must not be found here, must be sure that no one saw him lest the word reach Mister Sloane that Lili Osborn had returned him to Bonnaire.

The blinding sunshine on the rear verandah burned his eyes and sent him scurrying for cover. Ducking in among the shrubbery beneath the balustrade Tacooma made his way through myrtle and ixoria, his teeth clenched tightly with resentment, hating how he had to

hide and sneak about this place as though he were a fugitive, a criminal. This was not how he had pictured his return. The vision that he'd cherished was of a life lived in the open with his head held high - a free man. Had it been a naive fantasy? A dream that only fools believed in?

*Not be so!* Tacooma growled inside himself, his body straightening, muscles flexing. It was not for this so many of his people, proud Ashanti warriors, had fought and died beside him on this island in the past. This was his land too. He had the right to be here just as much as Patrick Sloane and all his *buckra* friends. In peace. In dignity. And with Pomelia as his lawful wife beside him.

The feel of the earth beneath his feet and the hot sun baking stiffness from his shoulders brought renewal of a youthful vigour. Running headlong, he sped eastward, jumping rows of prickly penguin shrub between the canefields, racing through the rolling, verdant pastures till he leaped the stone wall barrier that marked the farthest boundary of Bonnaire. Exhilarated, senses revelling in wild intoxication, he made for the woodland, racing through cool shadows, over vines and creepers, never stopping, never hesitating, filled with sheer delight as memories came back to him: the hidden paths, the shortcuts through the ceiba trees; the hillocks that allowed a running start so men could fly like deer across bright streams; the waterfalls with caves behind to rest in, to be rejuvenated in before the final trek across a gully, through the marshy bottoms towards the sugar works of Oxford Hall.

He burst out of the forest, drenched with perspiration, heart pumping like a *goombah* in his chest. Gulping air, he dropped into a crouch like a leopard stalking through the canebreak, giving a wide berth to the sound of shackles and the crack of drivers' whips along the oxpaths. He was moving south now, doubling back around the northside until at last, beyond the fields, he saw the Great House standing on the high ground like a

white stone fortress. This was his objective, and within, his prize.

The sight of it, that place where he had been imprisoned, brought a queasy rumbling to his stomach and icy chills along his neck. Swallowing his terror, concentrating on the reason he had come, he moved a little closer to the building, darting from the cover of a banyan tree into the shadow of the stable eaves, inching through a narrow space between two shops until finally he was behind the smokehouse, merely yards from the piazza running end-to-end across the mansion's rear side.

Just as he was wondering how best to proceed indoors without detection, Tacooma felt a trembling in the earth beneath him, heard the sharp tattoo of hoofbeats pounding up along the drive. Ducking down behind the well he watched a slave on horseback gallop round the corner of the house, jump to the ground and run inside.

In moments others hurried out of doors: a flock of washerwomen bearing baskets on their heads; Mulatto house-girls running towards the kitchen building; black maids struggling underneath the weight of carpets to be beaten in the early morning air. Tacooma overheard brief snatches of their conversations reaffirming what his observations had already told him. There could only be one reason for such pandemonium so early in the day. The Massa soon would be arriving. Woe to those responsible if everything were not in readiness!

As soon as everyone had disappeared, Tacooma crossed to the piazza and moved indoors into the sewing room. He stopped there, eyes adjusting to the dimness, wondering where he'd find Pomelia. Time was precious. He must take her and depart before it was too late.

'Tacooma! What you doin' back here?'

The unfamiliar voice spun him around. 'How you know me name?' he asked the girl who stood regarding him with mild amusement.

She giggled, blinked her eyes flirtatiously. 'Not you remember Juliett, de frien' of Pommie, helps she when

dey gots Tacooma in de cellar? She tucked a wisp of hair beneath her turban, smoothed the wrinkles of a faded dress. 'Me s'pose Tacooma sleepin' pretty hard dat time, for gettin' strong again. But now him fit, me see. Is so?'

'Is so,' he echoed, grateful to her, obliged to make conversation but determined to get on about his business. 'Where dat woman be?' he asked, attempting to sound casual, even offhand; failing miserably.

The housemaid laughed again, her eyes aglow with mischief as she drew her own conclusions. 'Pommie roun' dis house someplace me 'pec, jus' waitin' on de massa. Juliett fin' where, an' calls she quick ...'

'No! Bes' for be surprise,' Tacooma answered, fearing someone else might overhear her and learn of his arrival. 'Me comes upon her, sure ting,' he insisted, starting towards the door.

On impulse he moved to the staircase, reasoning that it would be most logical to start his search in Patrick's bedroom. Carefully he crossed the upper gallery, straining to perceive some sound behind the doors, frightened to open one and come upon Victoria.

'Tacoomal'

'Gal, you scares de heart out o' me ches!'

 Tacooma clutched the railing, waiting for the world to tilt back into focus.

A finger raised across Pomelia's lips entreated silence as her other hand reached out to guide him back in with her through the centre doorway. 'Come wid me. Is safe in dere,' she whispered as she stepped inside ahead of him. 'What bring you back anudder time? Is trouble come again?'

He did not answer her, intimidated by the atmosphere in which he found himself.

'Not you be frighten. Massa Patrick stayin' 'way till dark,' Pomelia moved to close the door.

He whirled, alarmed to hear the latch click shut behind him. 'Not stay here. We gots to go now.'

'Go? Go where? Pomelia can' go no place. Not you

hear? De massa comin' home soon. Gots to make dis place for ready.'

'Please,' Tacooma groaned. 'We gots to pull-foot quick 'fore anybody sees.'

She stared at him, eyes clouding with confusion. 'Not you listen? Massa Patrick comin' back from Spanish Town an' bring dem udder *buckras* wid him. Sure dey's wantin' food an' drink an' nice clean beds for sleepin'. Pommie gots no time for playin' now.'

Tacooma blinked, unable to believe what he was hearing. 'Not me askin' you for playin', gal! Me askin' you to come wid me - to pull-foot from dis place fo'ever!'

Pomelia pulled away, eyes filled with tears. 'What for you sayin' ting like dat? What for you wan' to bring de sadness on Pomelia, tinkin' ting what never come to pass?'

Her words, the sorrow in her voice brought sudden comprehension.

'Me knows dat you feelin' sometin' dere,' Tacooma challenged. 'What for now you hidin' such, pretendin' like it not be so?'

The woman sniffed loudly, trying to control the flow of tears. 'Tacooma knows dat *buckra*. He seen de ting him do. Him sen' de dogs out sure if Pommie gone, not stoppin' till dere's every *buckra* lookin', till him catch Tacooma an' Pomelia bot'!'

'Is not s'pose to be like dat no more! In Englan' dey be sayin' how de slave can buy Free Paper now.'

'But dis not Englan', she reminded him.

'Is still de law. Me sure on it,' Tacooma answered, brightening as hope returned. 'Is how we do de ting! We buys Pomelia 'way from Massa Patrick soon's we have de money.'

Shining eyes looked upward, sparkling with a new enthusiasm. 'Pommie gots some money. Guinea pieces what she savin' all dem year.' The smile turned suddenly sheepish, bashful. 'Pomelia tinkin' same ting bout Free Paper, time-a-time, but gots no cause for tryin'. Not till now.'



'Den it be done!' Tacooma burst out. 'She gives de massa all dat money an' him gots to make she free.'

'Not be so fas' for sayin' so,' Pomelia answered thoughtfully. 'Is maybe yes an' maybe no. Not sure bout nothin' wid dat *buckra*-man.'

'But Pommie ask him on de ting, yes? Shows dat money. Say him how she give him all what's dere for buy Free Paper, plenty 'nough for him buy udder slave gal!'

Pomelia nodded slowly. 'Me ask him on it,' she replied. 'Me begs him hard an' den we see.' She looked at him and smiled again, her lips aquiver, dark eyes gleaming unmistakably with love's new light.

The sight of it, the certainty that she returned his feelings eased aside the last of inhibition. Groaning deeply in his throat Tacooma crushed her to him, pressing his lips against her own aware that he would never rest until she'd freed herself of Patrick Sloane - till she belonged to him, alone.

## 14

Lili was awakened by the sounds of city life beyond the shutters: horses' hooves and carriage wheels; the cries of hawkers; children shrieking as they raced in play. At first, she did not realise where she was. Alarmed, confounded, Lili sat straight up in bed, disoriented by the squalor that surrounded her.

The little cubicle was dark and airless, sweltering in the heat of morning, heady with the stench of open trenches seeping in through cracked and rotting wooden boards. Timidly, she reached out in the dimness, seeking Bobbie.

She was all alone; the threadbare sheet beneath her

rumpled, damp, a mute reminder of the night before. She stretched across the distance towards a chair on which her gown lay neatly draped and wondered as she slipped it on where Bobbie Norton might have gone.

From outside in the front room came the sound of footsteps and the clank and bang of iron pots. Her question answered, Lili moved across the chamber, smiling to herself as she anticipated sharing with her co-conspirator reflections of an experience which, having once been lived through, changed one's life forevermore.

'How do, Missy. Breakfas' soon be ready now.'

A momentary flash of anger in the clouded eyes turned towards her told the truth about the feelings underneath a patient, practised smile. Frozen in the doorway, Lili watched the woman move with actions guided, seemingly, by something other than a sense of sight as fingers cast about, discovered the location of an oven door and pulled it open.

'You must be Bobbie's ... mother,' Lili ventured, flushing with embarrassment.

'Dat so. Me Cuba.'

'I am Lili Osborn,' she continued stiffly as she pulled a chair up to a long wood table.

'Me know who you be.' The words were soft, a growl that rumbled on the edge of malice. 'Bobbie say me 'bout you, an' dat meetin' at Miss Nellie's house.'

'I see. Did he say where he was going?'

Cuba hesitated. 'Me sen' him down in Baillie's Wharf for see if dere's a ship dere got some silk for sellin'. Long for walk widdout no horse. Him not be comin' back awhile.'

'He could have borrowed mine.'

'No. Cuba say him what be Missy's not for negga. Better so.' The woman squinted, mustering what little sight remained to scrutinise the stranger.

Lili understood that Cuba had contrived for them to be alone. The silence lengthening between them was in itself an eloquent indictment.

'What you wan' wid Bobbie?'

The demand burst suddenly upon her, catching her unaware. She sat rigidly upon the seat.

'Why nothing, really.'

'Him's a good boy, not be makin' trouble.'

'Yes. Of course. I realise that. 'Tis why we have become fast friends and why I'd like to help him.'

'Help him?' Cuba snorted. 'How de Missy tink she doin' such for bein' here de night, for sweet-up to dat boy an' gets him tinkin' is a good ting for a negga spen' him cravin' on a *buckra*-lady?'

'Please! Consider what you're saying,' Lili answered, fighting not to let her own resentment take control. 'Surely Bobbie's told you of my situation. Why do you suppose that I participated in that gathering last night? Can you not see that I am one of you?'

Broad nostrils flared. 'De missy not be same like Bobbie an' him mumma. Missy like de *buckra*-lady - look so, ac' so, live in fine big house wid slave fe do de work.'

'You cannot blame me for the way I was raised. But times are different now and I am changing with them. Otherwise, I never would have gone to Nellie Webster's house.'

'Me Bobbie say me all dem ting what happen. How dem *buckras* almos' catches him. What Missy tink dey do wid Bobbie if she not be dere for speakin' out?'

'Indeed there was that danger,' Lili murmured, 'but no less so for myself. If things are to be rectified upon this island we must band together with Free Coloureds from the other parishes. We must support the work of those in Kingston and in England till the Members of the House conclude that we will not be silenced.'

'Nothin' changel' the woman cried and crumpled suddenly onto her elbows at the table. 'Plenty year me livin' here 'fore you an' Bobbie in dis worl'. Me knows how *buckra*-man like Massa Patrick do de Coloureds - how it always be!'

'Perhaps things will be different in his lifetime for

your son,' said Lili, reaching out to take the woman's hand.

'Is worse for Bobbie!' Cuba pulled away. 'Him simple boy. Him a kindly person, always trustin', only wan' to see de good ting when dere's nothin' good fe seein'. Is why him not stay home dere quiet like him mumma. Why him goin' out where fightin' start.'

'But don't you think that it is worse for him and others like him to stand idly by?'

'Like Cuba?' The woman spat the thought into the open. 'Where de good dat fightin' bring, me askin'! Gots me boy t'rown in de workhouse las' time where dem *buckras* beats him, makes him dance de treadmill, twis' him foot up cripple. Nex' time, sure, dey kills him dere an' Cuba spen' dem years what's lef' alone.'

'But that is why I want to help - to fight until Free Coloureds need not live in fear of losing those they love. If men like Bobbie had the opportunity for decent work in places of their choosing you'd not have to sew until you're altogether blind.'

'Is better dat den lose me boy, den stay in Oxford Hall,' the woman snarled. 'Is poor, dis house, is stink an' tiny but is got no massa here, no *buckra*-man what beats me hard an' gives me *pickney* Cuba gots to feed sheself.' She paused, attempting to regain composure. 'Missy wan' fe help me Bobbie? Stay 'way den! Not go wid him anudder time till Massa Patrick hear 'bout such an' do me Bobbie badness. Shoot him like him try to shoot dat Mistah Rutlan'.'

Charles' name imposed into the conversation straightened Lili sharply in her chair. 'What do you know about that?' Lili whispered, frightened by the implication.

'Everybody sayin' how dem *buckras* shoot dem guns 'cause Missy Lili belly-up wid bot' dem fellas.'

'No! That cannot be the case! Please, Cuba, tell me you are saying this because you're angry.'

Cuba snorted, drew herself up haughtily. 'Me only sayin' same what plenty whispers in de parish.'

Lili understood the woman's logic. 'Yes, of course,' she murmured, rising and moving stiffly through the kitchen. 'You are right. 'Tis best I go now.' Then, remembering, she added, 'Please tell Bobbie ...'

'Mumma fin' a ting for say him,' Cuba interrupted. 'How de Missy gots to get back in Bonnaire an' how she tink is bes' fe she not come dis way no more.'

The lie spun Lili back around to face the woman. 'Please don't put it that way. You will make it seem as though I have abandoned him and turned my back upon the very cause for which we risked our lives!'

'Is bes' so. Mumma know de ting she doin'. Bobbie vex fe jus' a little time an' sorry cause de Missy gone. But den him finish wid it, put him min' on udder ting.'

Lili started to protest again, to search for something of a compromise. But with the anguish whirling through her mind alternatives escaped her. Nodding absently, she hurried from the cabin. All she could think of was her need to retreat, to flee her own predicament, although she knew there could be no forgetting what she'd just been told.

The sun was blazing, merciless, as Lili trotted Lady east along the road that paralleled the sea. There was nowhere she belonged it seemed, no single place or clear surrounding that reflected who she was or what she wished to be. The white elite upon this island, planters who had once accepted her as one of them, now spoke of her as though she were some wilful, shameless wench with no regard for proper morals. Charles, her brother, looked upon her as a mindless, reckless thing without sufficient sense to know when it was best to act or exercise restraint. The Negroes like Mirtilla, Granny Fushabah, were waiting for her to emerge as *Nyankupon's* embodiment on earth, while Coloureds such as Cuba viewed her best intentions as a threat against their safety, or, as in the case of Bobbie Norton, thought her to be able always to transcend mere mortal fears and rise heroically above the chaos.

Was it ever to be thus? she wondered. Was there no one who would recognise her for the simple human being that she was, caught up in circumstances not of her own choosing, striving desperately to make some sense and reason out of life? Was there no place that she might rest awhile, create asylum, find some peace?

The sweet, angelic lilt of children's singing drifted up to her from somewhere deep within a leafy hollow, startling in its purity, a violent contrast with the turmoil raging in her soul. Impulsively, she stopped the horse and listened, welcoming a rise of pleasure even problems such as hers could not dispel.

*Spread, O spread the mighty word,  
Spread the kingdom of the Lord,  
That to earth's remotest bound  
Men may hear the joyful sound ...*

The poignant innocence of Negro children singing hopefully of joy and salvation brought a lump into her throat as Lili felt within herself a re-creation of such feelings from her own youth - days so long ago it seemed, when it was natural to trust and to believe in endless possibilities, to view the world with wonder and astonishment, when everything was simple, new, and unequivocally right or wrong. Unable to resist, inexorably drawn by such a purity of faith, she climbed from Lady's back and made her way in the direction of the singing, moving over rough terrain and fighting to retain a foothold as she side-stepped down an incline over piles of refuse strewn across the ground. At the bottom, through a stand of chinaberry trees she came upon a small, rude building, rickety and lopsided; wallboards were torn back from its frame, a dozen shingles missing from the roof or dangling at the edge. Engaged more deeply by the incongruity between these vile surroundings and the music coming from within she tiptoed to a spot where she might peep in through a window without being noticed.

The scene inside, so tranquil and serene, seemed

utterly fantastical to Lili moving her close to tears. Upon a desk, his shirtsleeves rolled up past the elbows, Andrew Baker sat, a hymnal held in one hand while the other moved in rhythm with the music. At his feet a group of ragged children clustered, faces fixed in rapture, gazing up at him adoringly. The closeness of the teacher to his pupils and the contentment on their faces told of a communication and a unity of spirit inconceivable between the races on this island. Grouped together as they were, aglow in sunbeams streaming through the open ceiling, it appeared, indeed, as if the Lord were watching them and smiling His benevolence upon this marvellous tableau.

So totally engrossed was she that Lili did not realise he had spotted her until her name rang out across the humid, steaming air.

'Miss Osborn? Lili Osborn! Do come in and join us,' Andrew called above the peels of laughter rising as all heads turned towards the open window.

Lili swallowed hard, the fever of embarrassment grown hot upon her neck. 'Oh, no, I couldn't, really. Please excuse me. It was not my wish to interrupt ...'

'Why, not at all! We're always glad for visitors, new members, possibly. Is that not so, children?'

They stopped their giggling at once and turned back towards him, eyes cast downward. 'Yes *Sahl*!' came a dozen voices in exaggerated tones of reverence.

'Well then, let us show the lady how we're coming with our lessons. Who among us can remember all the alphabet?'

A dozen hands flew up into the air.

'Slates ready?' Andrew cried and flashed a smile of devilment towards Lili. 'Come now everybody, double up!' He clapped his hands for them to rearrange themselves in pairs behind the desks. 'Now let us have no peeping. When I return I shall expect to see the letters clearly written out on everybody's board. Upon your marks now: one ... two ... three ...'

A hush of industry descended on the little scholars as

their teacher made his way along the aisle past faces tight with concentration, heads bowed over slates where fingers raced. Lili could not keep from grinning as he walked out through the door and moved in her direction, brushing chalk dust from his hands. 'Indeed, you're wonderful!' she cried. 'My dear sir, I had no idea that gentlemen could be so skilled with children.'

'Tis a simple matter really, loving them,' he answered, smiling shyly, not unlike his little charges. 'Pity though, there are so few permitted to attend the school. Lord knows these children have so much to learn, so little opportunity.'

'But you are here now like a ray of light upon this island.'

Andrew smiled wanly, shrinking from the compliment. 'Tis very kind of you to say so, Miss Osborn, but my poor light serves only to display the hideous abominations in Jamaica. As it is, I've only just sufficient time to discharge the common functions of my office - burying, marrying and christening, attending to my Sunday church. Yet I endeavour to do all I can. Within the last month I have twice made known to principal proprietors within this parish my readiness to educate their slaves, but I have not been able to obtain consent for this from more than two of them. I am opposed, abused, insulted, thought of as a menacing intruder, an incendiary even, who has come here under pretence of instructing slaves to foul their minds with notions harmful to themselves, injurious to their masters.' He stopped then, sighing wearily as he brushed aside a lock of wheaten hair that had adhered across his forehead. 'I am sorry to ramble on so, but at times the circumstances here are quite distressing.'

'Who could blame you for the things you feel?' she answered, comprehending the dilemma, searching in her mind for some way she might be of help. 'The task is difficult at best, but to be met with such resistance in addition ...'

'Massa Minister?'



A trembling voice edged in among her words and Lili looked down into huge, wide eyes that brimmed with tears.

'Me can' go pas' dis one.' The little girl displayed a slate with but three letters scrawled upon it.

'Now, now - do not cry my dear,' said Lili, kneeling down beside the child. 'Let me help you.'

Instantly, a dozen others rushed up, crying out that they, as well, could not complete the task. Arms outspread, Lili gathered them around, began to say the letters of the alphabet, inviting everybody to recite along with her.

When it was finished they pressed closer, clinging to her hands, her forearms, fighting to be nearest or to touch some portion of her gown as though to do so were to reach the lady's heart as well.

'Enough now, children. That is quite enough!' cried Andrew as the situation threatened to get out-of-hand. 'Tis almost noon and high time you were getting ready to depart. Go quickly now and gather your belongings. Then you may say good-bye to Miss Osborn.'

They moved indoors reluctantly, necks craning, heads turned round as searching eyes seemed frightened to lose sight of her.

'You see, they are in need of everything,' said Andrew, struggling to maintain an even tone of voice. 'These children thirst for love, for just the slightest evidence of tenderness. 'Twould take at least a hundred pairs of hands in order to reach out to everyone.'

'But they must have their duel' she cried, the weight of misery tugging at her heart. 'Are there no laws ...?'

'Tis true, a law exists enjoining rectors to reserve a certain portion of each Sunday to instruct such slaves as might appear. But this, with few exceptions, is a rarity. A few are baptised in the different parishes, but ceremony by itself is of no use without the necessary groundwork of instruction.'

'Something must be done,' Lili fixed her eyes on the line of youngsters filing back out through the doorway,

faces beaming as they turned in her direction, waving, smiling, calling out her name.

'We are hard put to find the means,' he whispered. 'Slates, desks, proper books with which to teach them how to read ...'

'To say nothing of a proper schoolhouse!' Lili added, glancing towards the roof.

'Tis true, as I have written to the committee back in England. But, alas, the funds are slow in coming.'

'Have you told them this is dangerous? Entirely unsuitable for children?' Lili swept into the little building, pointing with dismay at evidence of disrepair on every side. 'What if those rotting rafters tumble down upon the little ones? Heaven only knows what tragedy might come of it!'

'Indeed, that is quite true,' said Andrew, following after. 'But what more can we do?'

'Repair it, and at once!' she cried with sudden, firm resolve.

'A lovely thought. But there is still the very real consideration of the necessary funds.'

'No matter. You shall have it all from me - materials, and slaves to do the work.'

'Praise God, Miss Osborn! Are you serious?'

'Of course I am,' she answered. 'In the meantime, till this building is complete, Bonnaire shall be your school-room. We shall hold our class outdoors on the verandah and the children shall have something nourishing to eat before they learn ...'

She went on, lost in her anticipation of it, happily caught up in visions of those eager little faces drinking in the knowledge Andrew Baker waited to impart.

'Miss Osborn, I am quite sure I cannot find words, the proper means by which to say the things I feel ...' His eyes were shining, almost luminous as they regarded her.

'Please, Reverend, that is quite unnecessary,' Lili answered, turning from his boyish smile, disarmed by her response to it. 'Tis I who benefits as much as they.'

'And there's a Christian sentiment quite rare upon this

island, I am sure! Indeed, the Lord has sent you for the very purpose of assisting us.'

'Please don't. You give me too much credit. I do nothing more than any other.'

'You are quite exceptional, you know?' He took her hands in his and squeezed them affectionately.

'No, not at all ...'

'Hello there! Reverend Baker? Andrew?'

Victoria's voice imposed upon the gentle moment caught them both by surprise. They felt that somehow they had behaved improperly. Quickly, Lili took a step away from him, but not before she'd seen in Andrew's eye the same thing she'd been feeling, she was sure - a certain spark, a quality of interest that she dared not dwell upon.

'Why, Lili Osborn! Of all people! What are you doing here?'

'Just passing by,' she answered flustered, decimated by the hostile glare directed at her. 'I was riding back from town ...'

'Miss Sloane, I have the most exciting news,' said Andrew, coming to her rescue. 'Miss Osborn has most generously offered to rebuild the schoolhouse and in the meantime is allowing us to hold our classes at Bonnaire.'

'Has she now?' Victoria answered, her smile brittle. 'How very pious of you, Lili! How devout! Such dedication!' Venom dripped from every syllable.

'Twas nothing ... really,' Lili stammered. 'Surely you'd have done the same had you been here and seen those darling children ...'

'Yes! Indeed! I'm sure that is the case.' She turned from Lili, thrust a dozen books at Andrew. 'Well!' she sighed. 'I'd thought to make a small donation to the mission, Andrew, but apparently my humble contribution is no longer necessary.'

'Come, Miss Sloane, there is no need to feel that way. You know we are in desperate need ...'

'Not for much longer, I am certain,' she replied, an eyebrow arching pointedly. 'No doubt you shall have everything that you desire now.' With that she turned her

back on both of them and left.

For long, uncomfortable moments neither one responded, frozen into painful silence as they watched Victoria depart. Unnerved, intimidated, they avoided looking at each other. Both were dismayed by the implications hanging in the air.

Andrew was the first to rally. 'I shall have a word with her,' he murmured, starting forward.

'No, please, let me,' Lili cried, distraught. Without awaiting his reply she hurried outside, relieved to have this excuse to flee from Andrew's sight lest he perceive the depth of feeling in her heart and recognise its cause.

She reached the road just as Victoria was settling herself into an open carriage. 'Please, Victoria, wait,' she called.

'Surely there is nothing to discuss,' Victoria insisted, her manner rigid, furious, her gaze fixed icily ahead of her.

'Indeed, there is a great deal, I am certain,' Lili said. 'No doubt you've misconstrued and misunderstood the circumstances here. The simple truth is when I came upon those children, all of them so sweet, so pitiful, 'twas only natural for me to help.'

'To help yourself, you mean!' Victoria snapped. 'Please Lili, do not play me for the fool. No doubt you've got the Reverend hoodwinked with that virginal, ingenuous charade. But I am not so blind as he. To think I once considered you my friend.'

'I *am* your friend. I'd never think to hurt you.'

'Spare me your deception, Lili Osborn! I can see you now for what you really are.' Victoria snatched up the reins. 'I'm sure that Father and the other planters of Trelawny will be very interested to hear what you are doing, and believe me, they shall know it soon enough. If you think tongues have wagged before, you wait until I've finished. I shall ruin you upon this island. Ruin both of you!' She flicked the whip and sent the sulky skittering onto the road.

For many moments Lili stood dumbfounded, hidden

in the cloud of dust behind the carriage. Listlessly she turned, then stopped, uncertain what was best to do. With all her heart she wanted to return to Andrew and explain what had happened, but she could not - dared not. How would such a man defend himself against the wrath of someone like Victoria. And how would he respond, what would he think were he to guess, as he might have already, that the woman's innuendo was not totally without its element of truth?

Indeed, she must not go to him, must not provide the opportunity for someone else to come upon them all alone and draw the wrong conclusions. Dismally she walked to where her horse was tethered, climbed up onto Lady's back and trotted off, desperately sorry for having got Andrew into this predicament but aware that nothing she might say or do would keep Victoria from her revenge.

Lili rose aimlessly for a while, not knowing what to do or where to go.

She could not go back to Bonnaire just yet, but where else was there? In need of refuge, Lili chose to make her first stop Allamanda Hall where perhaps Charles might have some word of consolation, some advice to offer that could help her find her way out of this dreadful situation.

No sooner had she turned in through the gates than Lili spotted Charles' coach-and-four.

'Hello there, Lili,' Charles called as the driver slowed the horses. 'I was just en route to fetch you from Bonnaire. Come quickly now.' He held the door ajar. 'There is no time to waste.'

She slid down to the ground and tossed the reins to Cambridge who'd come running alongside. Curious, intrigued, she climbed into the carriage, settled in the seat beside her brother. 'What is this now?' Lili said when he had told the coachman to proceed.

'Prepare yourself. I have the most exciting news.'

'I am sure I cannot guess,' said Lili, mixed emotions

nagging at her as she realised he had made no mention of the meeting in Montego.

'Aunt Emily is back - and Uncle Avery!' Charles exclaimed. 'I've just got word their ship is docking down in Falmouth Harbour. Finally, the family is complete again.'

Lili nodded, heartened at the news. 'And just in time no doubt, you must be thinking,' Lili quipped.

'Whatever do you mean by that?' The guilty look on Charles' face belied the innocent reply.

'Oh come now, Charles. How often have I heard you wish for Emily's return so she might keep an eye on me?'

'Since you have stated it so plainly I shall not deny the truth,' Charles said. 'My dear, you've no idea how worried I have been. I do not think I passed an hour last night without the most disturbing premonitions on the subject of your safety.'

The sincerity of his concern dispelled her irritation. Lili placed her head upon his shoulder. 'Last night was the least of it, I fear. As you can see, I have survived. But everything's gone wrong this morning, absolutely everything!'

'What's happened now?' Charles touched her shoulder. 'What are you referring to?'

She did not answer, loath to give him further cause to think her ill-equipped to manage independently. But then the words began to pour and the truth came tumbling out until she'd told him what had happened at the schoolhouse. 'What am I to do?' she whimpered tearfully. 'I've no idea what to expect, which way to turn.'

The look upon his face was grave as Charles reached for a handkerchief and handed it to Lili. 'To begin, you must rescind your offer that Bonnaire become a classroom. You must never be alone with Andrew Baker. As for Miss Victoria, I suppose that I might speak with her - although I do not hold out much hope that it will bring the desired results.'

'Oh would you, Charles?' said Lili, honestly encour-

aged. 'She will listen to you, I'm certain of it. From the very first she seemed so eager for your friendship.'

'Hardly friendship she was seeking,' Charles replied disdainfully. 'I daresay Lili, I have never met a woman so flirtatious, so inclined to flaunt herself.'

'Does that distress you?' Lili said, attempting to make light of it for fear that he might change his mind. 'I'd wager there are many men who would be glad to be the object of such amorous inclinations.'

'Well ... yes ... I suppose so.' Red-faced, Charles sat upright in the seat, his interest redirected towards the scene beyond the carriage window as they passed a clearing with an unobstructed view across the water. 'Lili, look. Down near the wharves ...' He pointed towards the harbour in the distance. 'That ship must be the *Merry Barbara*. Hurry driver!' Charles called, thrusting his head out of the carriage.

Lili followed Charles' gaze then fell back wearily, content to let the subject of Victoria subside for now, as eager in her way as he to be distracted by the hubbub that attended the arrival of a sailing ship from England.

Turning left through Water Square they inched their way towards Harbour Lane, engulfed by streams of people pouring out of sidestreets, slowed by donkey carts and oxdrawn wagons creeping in the same direction. Reaching Falmouth Street the carriage halted, trapped there by a great convergence of pedestrians and vehicles.

'Best we proceed on foot,' Charles swung the carriage door wide open. 'If you'd like to wait here, Lili ...'

'I would not,' she answered, moving after him, determined she would not be left behind to think, to brood, to backslide into the doldrums of remorse.

She made her way beside her brother past the warehouses and chandler's shops on Seaboard Street, then finally to the quayside. Here the pandemonium was at its peak as people rushed in all directions: merchants, tradesmen, stevedores and beggars. But something was amiss Lili sensed; something was not quite in harmony with the occasion. At first she could not name it, did not

understand just what had struck her as peculiar. Gazing around she saw it then, perceived an undercurrent in the crowd as knots of people formed with agitated looks upon their faces, whispering, regrouping, gesturing intensely as they recognised newcomers.

'Charles! Charles Rutland!'

Lili turned to see a wiry, nervous looking man attempting to make headway through the crowd.

'Gideon!' Charles greeted him enthusiastically as they shook hands. 'What brings you down from Taylor's Pen, my friend? It seems that all Trelawny is assembled here today. Are you expecting someone on the ship?'

'I could not stay at home once I had heard the news. Indeed, the whole town has turned out to speak of it.'

'What news?' Charles questioned. 'I've heard nothing.'

'My good man, are you not aware that last night in Montego a contingent of the local planters and their friends in the constabulary swooped down on a secret meeting of Free Coloureds masquerading as a musical society? A number of arrests were made. There's to be trouble now, I'm sure of it. A nasty business and a damned shame, if you ask me. Pardon, Miss.' He doffed his hat towards Lili.

'Who was taken?' Lili cried, the colour draining from her cheeks.

'No less than John LeClerc from Kingston,' Gideon replied. 'At long last they have got him. I'm afraid that they mean to set him up as an example. And Miss Nellie Webster, too ...'

'Dear God!' cried Lili, panic-stricken. 'What will happen to them now?'

'I'd not presume to wager on their safety,' Gideon responded sadly. 'For all we know, by this time they already may have breathed their last ...'

'Lili. Charles. Here, over this way!'

Lili spun in the direction of the voice, an anguished cry escaping from her throat as she observed a dark-haired woman waving frantically in her direction. Mindless of the way she looked, unable to contain her



feelings, she dived headlong through the crowd and flung her arms around the woman's shoulders.

'Emily, Aunt Emily,' she wept against a perfumed bodice. 'Thank heaven you are home.'

## 15

She would never have supposed the time would come when she'd feel glad to be returning here, but even the monotony of Oxford Hall was preferable to second breakfast with the ladies of Trelawny Parish.

Victoria descended from her sulky, hot, disgruntled, yearning for a pitcher filled with sangaree to quench her thirst and drown her sorrows. Gladly, were he here, would she have strangled Father for accepting invitations in her name. Those women! Such a tiresome lot, redundant and provincial, gawking at her gown, at her hair done up *en touffes* as though she were unfashionable and they in their plebeian drabness the epitome of *haute couture*. And how they ate. Good heavens! Now she understood why ladies of this island took so precious little at the dinner table.

Endlessly it seemed she'd nursed a single cup of tea and squirmed with boredom as the women rattled on about amelioration, no doubt parroting their husbands till Victoria had cleverly detoured the conversation. Then, each flushed, mosquito ravaged face had paled with shock, recoiled in horror even as the ladies edged in closer, hungering for every nuance of the scandal as she told her tale of Lili and the Reverend. By suppertime, no doubt, the gossip would have spread to every planter's table.

Victoria consoled herself with this as she approached

the steps. But even as she savoured in her mind the yield to come from seeds she'd sown, there was not the satisfaction she'd anticipated. Lili Osborn's reputation was about to be destroyed. Yet, for herself, there still remained the bitter truth of personal failure, the unbearable reality that Andrew had been lost to her. Again she was alone, abandoned, left without a single suitor to protect her from the fate of death-by-tedium.

Her sense of isolation struck her that much more profoundly as she noticed the complete absence of attention there was to her arrival. Puzzled not to see a single slave in sight, she stepped inside the doorway and yanked a bellpull till there came at last the sound of footsteps hurrying in her direction.

'Where has everybody gone?' Victoria demanded testily when Juliett appeared.

'Me sorry, Miss Victoria,' the housemaid answered. 'We not 'spectin' you dis soon. Me back dere workin' in de kitchen wid dem udders what be cookin' fe tonight when Massa comin'.'

'Tonight? What makes you think so? I had not expected Father for another week at least.'

'Oh no. Him comin' back dis day fe sure. Him sen' a boy here early, say we dat him bringin' twenty *buckramen* wid him fe sleepin'.'

'Oh that is absolutely grand,' Victoria snarled sarcastically, turning to stare out through the open doorway. This was exactly what she needed after what she had already been through: Father and a bevy of his friends descending to transform the place into a bawdyhouse with their unbridled revelries. Was it not enough that she'd been forced to bear the company of planters' wives this day? Must she now listen to the men repeat those woeful sentiments *ad nauseam*. Must she endure behind a smiling mask their tiresome prophecies of doom until a signal from her father told her it was time to steal away upstairs so that the gentlemen might spend their energies upon the coloured housemaids?

'Is sometin' more what Missy wan?'

The sound of Juliett's voice recalled Victoria from her bitter thoughts.

'Indeed there is,' she snapped. 'Run to the kitchen for some sangaree.'

'Yes, Missy.' Juliett turned, about to leave.

'On second thoughts,' Victoria called after her, 'fetch me a glass of water and the flask of brandy from my bonnet drawer upstairs.' With that she stepped outside and dropped into a wicker chair to sulk.

She was distracted from her brooding by the sound of hoofbeats as a Negro boy rode up along the drive.

'Miss Victoria? Victoria Sloane?' the boy pulled off his hat.

'Yes, I am she. Have you a message from my father?'

'No, Miss,' he replied and reached into a pocket. 'Dis note here from Massa Charles.'

'Charles? Charles Rutland?'

'Yes, Miss,' Cambridge answered, hopping down and running towards her. 'Massa say me give dis, den to wait fe bring de answer.'

*My dear Miss Sloane,*

*It is imperative I speak with you in reference to a matter of the utmost urgency. Would you be good enough to indicate, via the manservant who delivers this, when it might be convenient that I call at Oxford Hall?*

*Awaiting your reply, I remain entirely at your disposal.*

*Your humble servant,  
Charles Rutland*

Deep concentration lines across her face relaxed into a smile as she re-read the letter, sounding over in her mind the words that so intrigued her. '*Entirely at your disposal*,' she reflected, such a notion bringing visions clear enough to take her breath away.

'Missy?'

'What?' Victoria snapped, infuriated at the interruption.

'Is de 'freshment what you ask for,' Juliett squeaked.

'Never mind that.' Victoria waved the girl away. 'Fetch pen and paper, quickly!' Then, regarding Cambridge once again, she added sweetly, 'I shall have your answer in a moment.'

Seated at a table, pen in hand, Victoria hesitated, wondering if she dared to do this, knowing if she didn't there'd be no chance for her fantasy to turn into reality. Much as she desired it she could not invite Charles Rutland to come calling on her; not with Father due at any hour. Devilishly, delightedly, she made her choice and set about its implementation:

*Dear Mister Rutland,*

*Regrettably I find myself unable to comply with your request in view of Father's feelings and his imminent return from Spanish Town. However, in consideration of the urgency you mention, I shall take this opportunity (without, I trust, appearing too presumptuous) to invite myself to Allamanda Hall instead, where we may speak in private.*

*Until this evening then, at half past eight ...*

By half past seven she had changed her costume several times, rejecting each new outfit Juliett brought her, desperate to create precisely the appearance so essential for this night. Concerned that Father might appear at any moment, she decided finally upon a gown of white self-striped silk with puffed and banded sleeves, its waistline raised and gathered neath the breasts to emphasise their thrust and fullness. Laughingly, she touched her fingers to the modest, lace encrusted spencer bodice - so demure, so coy in contrast with her thoughts - and spun herself until the pleated skirt puffed full with air and floated round her knees. 'Ethereal ... a butterfly,' she thought with relish, smirking back into her mirror at an image of alluring innocence. 'Exactly what a man like Charles will least be able to resist!'

Encouraged by the transformation Victoria tied on a

*paille de riz* hat crowned with feathers, carefully adjusting it upon the bands of copper coloured hair fresh-dressed with V shaped partings. Satisfied at last, she draped a fichu of embroidered tulle around her shoulders, turned and swept out of the room, prepared and eager to experience the night's adventure.

The pink house perched above the sea was smaller than her own but not, Victoria observed, without a certain charm, a sweet simplicity. The smallest alterations - the addition of a wing here, a piazza there - and she could live contentedly with Mister Rutland, blissfully removed from Father and the crass vulgarity of Oxford Hall.

'Miss Sloane, how good of you to come on such short notice!' Charles' voice resounded as he stepped out through the huge front door.

Victoria nodded, her gaze averted guiltily from his, but not without first noticing how beams of moonlight lent a golden glow to flaxen hair, enhanced the sharply chiselled angles of his jaw and cheekbones. 'Surely I could not do otherwise upon receipt of such an urgent summons,' she replied and flashed her most ingratiating smile in his direction. Indeed, the man was even handsomer than she'd remembered. Just a trifle taller, more assertive, self assured...

'In deference to your wish for privacy I've sent the servants from the house.' Charles moved to hand Victoria down from the carriage.

She laughed within herself, delighted to embark upon this game with him at last. Whom did he think that he was fooling after all? A private rendezvous, the servants gone away, perhaps a cosy supper just for two. Of course he wanted her. 'Twas only that the man had needed time to gather up his courage.

'I've assumed the liberty of setting out a bit of supper,' Charles continued, offering his arm and squiring her indoors. 'In view of the regrettable occurrences on Christmas Day I thought perhaps we'd take this

opportunity to mend the fragments of a budding friendship.'

'My sentiments exactly, and how beautifully you put it,' she agreed. 'I see no reason why the differences between yourself and Father need preclude an amicable association for the two of us ...' She stopped then, overwhelmed, as Charles directed her into a sitting room where flickering candles stood in silver holders on a table lavishly prepared for two.

'May I take your hat and shawl?' He turned to face her in the shadows. 'If you'd care for some, I have decanted what I trust you'll find to be a most refreshing port.'

His eagerness to please her, this romantic setting, stirred a sensuality within Victoria that even she had not foreseen. 'I must say, Charles, you are a man of most surprising, cultivated tastes.' Her voice was noticeably huskier as she undid the bonnet ribbon, slipped the fichu from her shoulders. 'Till this evening I'd despaired of knowing anyone upon this island who appreciates life's sweet refinements.'

'I, too, have moments when I miss the continent, the elegance and style one comes to take for granted when in London. That is where I studied law, you know.' He gently placed her things upon a drop-leaf table, turned and hurried to a sideboard, reaching there for sparkling crystal on a silver tray. 'It was my mother's notion that I go, although I must confess that at the time I rather thought she wanted to be rid of me.'

'I understand exactly what you mean,' Victoria answered glumly. 'Father packed me off to Europe also when my own dear mother died, no doubt to spare himself the burden of a growing child.'

'No need to speak of such unpleasant matters,' Charles responded, coming back to press a glass into her hand. 'This is to be a happy evening, is it not? Let's drink to that.'

Their dinner was a leisurely, enchanted stretch of time enriched by pleasant conversation and warm conviviality as wine grew low in the decanter. It was not until

he'd set a tray of ginger cakes before her and the tolling of a clock from somewhere in another room came drifting through that she took notice of the hour.

'Surely, I should take my leave before the tongues begin to wag at home.'

'But we have not discussed the reason I invited you tonight.'

*The reason?* Charles' words resounded in her head, disturbing her, confusing her. *Was there another purpose other than the one that she'd assumed?*

Victoria recovered just in time to hide her own bewilderment. 'Forgive me Charles but you are such a gracious host ... I must admit all serious thoughts escaped my mind.' She moved to a long settee upholstered in a rich blue velvet, haunted by the fear that she'd misjudged the man, herself as well - distraught to think that all her plans, all her hopes for love and security at last were doomed to failure. 'Now, what is the urgency about?' she said, her voice expertly pitched towards nonchalance.

Charles sat beside her, staring at his toes as though he were afraid to voice his thoughts. 'It is about Miss Lili Osborn,' he began at last.

'Indeed? And what has she to do with this?'

'The lady is an old friend - and a dear one,' Charles went on. 'A valued client, too. I am afraid there's been a most regrettable misunderstanding; one which, hopefully, shall be set right before this evening's done.'

'I see,' Victoria replied, alarmed to feel the magic slipping from the atmosphere. 'And what misunderstanding might that be?'

Charles looked at her, his eyes intense with earnest pleading. 'Living on an island as we do, the slightest hint of indiscretion could be ruinous. Why, even you, yourself, made mention of the hour and what might be construed at home when you return. It seems, Victoria, that Lili Osborn, like yourself, could very well become the victim of the most distressing speculation should a certain set of circumstances be set out in the open.'

Victoria was barely able to contain the nervousness that threatened to destroy her ladylike demeanour. 'No doubt you speak of Lili and the Reverend Andrew Baker,' she replied.

'I do,' he answered. 'But I see now, having spent this time with you, that I have worried needlessly. Miss Lili will be most relieved to learn that you have not interpreted her presence at the mission earlier today as other than an innocent encounter ...'

As Charles went on, Victoria felt the heat of fury rising, blocking out his words, her promise to herself that she would not give way to violent jealousy.

'Is *this* why you have brought me here and gone to such great pains to entertain me?' she accused, withdrawing from him, sliding back on the settee.

'Why no ... of course not,' Charles protested weakly, guiltily. 'I won't deny that it was in my mind to speak with you about that matter, but as for other, more personal feelings ...'

Satisfied, Victoria moved back in his direction, thinking she might be about to compromise herself, yet helpless to deny her need. 'Then prove it, Charles,' she whispered, reaching out to trace his jawline with a fingertip. 'Let's speak of this no longer. It is so unpleasant, so unsuitable for such a lovely evening.'

Charles nodded with relief and quivered at her touch. 'Agreed,' he whispered hoarsely. 'But you must assure me there will be no mention of Miss Lili and the Reverend which might possibly ...'

'You have my word on it,' she promised, desperate to appease him and to have her way, no matter what she had to do. 'That is, Charles, if you truly meant those things you said about your feelings for me ...'

For a moment, everything important to her seemed to hang suspended in the balance. Then there was no need for further proof as Charles reached out and took her in his arms.

She closed her eyes the better to experience his lips upon her own, to savour and enjoy the touch of fingers



moving eagerly along her body. Happily she sank down, drawing him along with her onto the pillows, knowing finally that she had won.

## 16

A sleepless night had turned her limbs to leaded weights, her eyes to burning orbs that scraped around their sockets. Painful bruises on her breasts, her thighs, recalled the feel of brutal fingers violating tender flesh. But worst of all was the anticipation of the day to come as dawn's first light stole through the shutters.

Pomelia raised herself up from the floor beside the bed and moved across the room on tiptoe, haunted by the sound of Patrick's snoring. Stale cigar smoke and the stench of rum hung thickly in the air and disarray on every side bore witness to the man's intemperance. Disgraced, ashamed, she foraged through a pile of clothing, found her gown and quickly covered up her nakedness. But there was no forgetting how the man had used her, no escaping the unprecedented truth that suddenly it mattered. For the first time since he'd forced her into submission, as a child, she experienced her body as her own, as something other than a mere commodity for white men to abuse. Unbidden, unexpectedly, Tacooma's love had made what she'd accepted as her lot in life unbearable.

Freedom ... The mere idea of it brought goosebumps to her flesh. *'Sweet Massa Jesus, stay here wid Pomelia when she ask de Massa ...'*

Finally, the chamber was presentable. Pomelia hurried to the door and poked her head into the gallery, wondering why Juliett had not appeared with Massa's

breakfast tray. Surprised to hear no sounds of life, she made her way downstairs and moved into the dining room.

The shutters there had not been opened and the room was strewn with empty bottles, goblets, crystal trays that overflowed with crushed cigar stubs. No cloth, no setting lay in readiness for Massa Patrick's breakfast. This was not like Juliett. Something must be wrong.

The creak of hinges and the sound of the back door slamming shut were followed by a high pitched voice that called her name. Pomelia ran across the room in time to intercept the serving girl who'd raced in from the rear piazza.

'Come quick, Miss Pommie, in de kitchen house. Is Juliett dere. She gots a knifel'

Pomelia did not stop to press for details. Terrified, she hurried outside and across a stretch of grass towards a wooden building which, by now, should have been emanating smells of bread and breakfast biscuits.

The moment that she stepped inside Pomelia felt the tension, saw the fear, the pleading in a dozen pairs of eyes turned towards her. Slowly, silently, a group of kitchen slaves stepped backward to reveal a single figure pressed into a corner, one hand clutching remnants of a dress above bare breasts, the other brandishing a gleaming blade.

'Juliett!' Pomelia cried.

'No touch me!' Juliett raised the knife point to her throat. 'Me do de ting, me use dis knife fe sure!'

Pomelia froze. 'What for you wan' fe hurt yourself like dat an' cut a pretty face?' Her gentle voice reached out to comfort, to cajole. 'Is nothin' be so bad what Juliett, she frien' Pomelia an' de Massa Jesus not be fixin' up togedder.'

Rigid tendons bulged along a silken neck; cracked, swollen lips began to quiver. 'Not goin' back dere - never!' Juliett rasped. 'Not bringin' breakfas' fe dem *buckras* what be touchin' me an' trickin' me ...' Her voice trailed off.

Pomelia nodded solemnly, transported for a moment back through time, caught up in recollections of a night when she was just a child and Patrick and his friends had pounced upon her also and used her mercilessly. 'You gots to live,' she whispered, arms outstretched in Juliett's direction. 'Not let dem *buckras* chase de spirit from de heart. Is sinful and wrong dat Juliett hurt sheself an' turn she back on what de sweet Lord givin'.'

Juliett gaped, astounded, disbelieving what she'd heard. 'Where all dem ting you speakin' 'bout?' she croaked. 'Where Massa Jesus hidin' when de negga gots a need fe Him? Las' night dey catches Juliett in de garden, four of dem what pulls she in de stable, t'rows she down dere in de horse dirt...' Juliett stopped, unable to endure the horror of it in the telling. Wearily, she let her arms drop to her sides and slumped against the wall.

The tattered dress fell open and Pomelia winced, revolted by raw, open wounds. She hurried forward, eased the knife from trembling fingers, wound her arms around the sobbing girl. 'De Lord be watchin' all of dis,' she murmured. 'Not you worry Him forgettin', neidder. Pommie promise dat! Him make de time fe pass an' takes away dat hurtful feelin'. Den we sees how all dem *buckra*-men what do de ting is punish for dat wickedness.'

The sounds of others moving closer drew her back from visions of revenge reminding her of more immediate necessities. 'What for you waitin' dere an' lookin'?' she reproached the kitchen slaves. 'Wan' you bring dem *buckras* here what's seein' dis an' whips we plenty hard fe holdin' back be breakfas'? Yabba! Fetch Miss Juliett de cloth dere on de table for a coverin'. Lucinda, Amaryllis, start de fire in dem oven! Venus, Bennebah, you takes dis gal here in you house an' gives she nice hot tub an' ting fe wearin'. Hide she good den, where de Massa an' dem *buckras* not be findin' she dis day!'

As others hurried to obey Pomelia turned to Juliett and whispered, 'Res' yourself a time an' pray fe Jesus put dat love back dere inside. Not look no more on all dat

badness in de night an' worry 'bout dem *buckras* in Great House.' Listening to her own advice she squared her shoulders, clenched her teeth against the fury gathering within her. 'Pommie sees to everything an' brings dat breakfas' up to Massa,' she announced.

Pomelia stood before the bedroom door. Inside herself the voice of common sense, self-preservation, fought against the plan she had in mind, recalled atrocities of which the man was capable. Had she not seen him torture other slaves with far less provocation? Was this not the man who'd killed her own, dear father? What made her think that just because she'd pandered to his every whim for thirty years he'd be inclined to grant her any favours?

'Here now, what is all the noise about?' a gravelly voice demanded from the pillows as Pomelia edged her way into the chamber.

Doggedly she fixed a smile upon her face and clutched the tray a bit tighter. 'Mornin', Massa. Gots you breakfas' here.' She set the tray down on a table near the bed.

Bleary, red rimmed eyes turned from the sight of hominy and corn cakes. 'God, don't speak t'me of food.' He pressed his palms against his forehead. 'Must o'had a bit o'rum last night, eh?'

'More den anybody, even all dem young men,' she replied, aware of what it took to flatter him. 'But if de Massa feelin' poorly, Pommie knows to fix dat, sure.' She sat down on the mattress, reached to press her fingers to the place behind his ears where gentle, circular massage would always ease the pain of mornings after.

'Aye, that's good m'girl.' He sighed and reached to cup the fullness of her breasts, to toy haphazardly with blunt, protruding nipples pressing brazenly against the thin material.

Pomelia looked away, attempting as she always did to separate herself from the reality of domination, trying to remember that she had to give him anything he wanted now, ingratiate herself for Tacooma's sake.

'A pity we've no time t'finish it,' he said reluctantly. 'The house is filled with guests.'

'Oh, dey's fine fe sure,' she answered, fearing this distraction, desperate for time alone with him to coax the man into a generous, expansive frame of min. 'Dey's all asleep still.'

Not for long, if I have anything t'say about it,' Patrick told her with a twinkle in his eyes. 'There's money t'be made this mornin', girl! Now hurry. Fetch clean britches an' a fresh washed shirt. Y'know I like t'look me best when separatin' planters from their gold ...'

Of all the horrors she had witnessed in her years at Oxford Hall the sale of slaves by Massa Patrick was undoubtedly among the worst, not only for the inhumanity of Negroes auctioned off like cattle, but because these pitiful, tormented souls did not belong to him.

Pomelia stood off to one side of the verandah, nervous, apprehensive, wounded by the sound of *buckra* laughter ringing loudly and raucously. For an hour and a half she'd watched as lines of prisoners were led up from the hothouse. All the while she'd listened to the most outrageous lies as Patrick fabricated backgrounds for his captives. He told tales of histories of breeding prowess and acquisitions at great cost when she knew very well that he'd sent Billy Austin on a tour of jails in far-flung parishes to claim the inmates with no papers, swear that they were runaways from Oxford Hall so they might once again be sold with no regard that they might actually be free men.

'Well then, that's the last of 'em,' the overseer's voice rang out.

Pomelia looked up, hoping Massa's friends would finally depart so she could try again to speak with him about her freedom.

'Not at all m'friends,' cried Patrick, smiling slyly. 'I have saved the best for last!' He pulled himself out of his

chair and called to Billy. 'Bring that nigger from the cellar.' Patrick winked. 'Y'know the one I mean.'

'Yessir!' Billy raced indoors.

Pomelia felt as though the rays of sun were burning through into her brain. Sick to her stomach suddenly, she grasped the balustrade and squeezed it to keep from screaming, panic-stricken at the thought of what was soon to happen.

'He's gone! The bloody beggar's disappeared.' The overseer burst out through the doorway, features twisted with dismay.

The colour drained from Patrick's face; his eyes grew narrow, dangerous. 'What are ya sayin'?' he demanded as he grabbed the young man by the collar. 'How can 'ee 'ave got out? Has someone forced the lock?'

'I checked that,' Billy answered, trembling. 'Not a sign of tamperin'. I swear I do not understand it.'

'So, you've saved the best for last, eh, Sloane?' a voice teased from the crowd. 'Indeed, your little joke is most amusing.'

'This is not a joking matter!' Patrick yelled, and turned to glare towards Pomelia. 'You! Come 'ere t'me,' he barked. 'I'd have a word with ya.'

She could hardly feel the floorboards underneath her feet as she strode stiffly towards him.

'Where's Tacooma?' Patrick growled when she was close enough to smell the stench of sangaree upon his breath.

'Pomelia don' know nothin', sah!'

'What do ya mean? You were supposed to watch 'im in me absence! Where in blazes 'as 'ee gone? A man does not just disappear without a trace! Has anyone come round the house?' He turned towards Billy, challenging again. 'Have you some notion, lad? Some light t'shed upon this mystery?'

The young man hesitated, forehead tight with concentration. 'There has only been one visitor while you were gone - but certainly she could not be the one responsible ...'

'She?' Patrick echoed, perking up. 'Who are ya speakin' of?'

'Miss Lili Osborn, from Bonnaire. Came round the other evenin'. Passed some minutes with yer daughter then departed.'

'Lili Osborn? ... from Bonnaire? ... I wonder ...'

'Maybe him be hidin' in dem fiel', Pomelia interjected, desperate to direct his thinking elsewhere.

'We shall find out soon enough!' said Patrick. 'Billy, send a boy t'fetch a horse. And as for you ...' He turned and glowered at Pomelia. 'You've not heard the last o'this. I'll finish with ya later!'

'In circumstances such as these a lady has but two alternatives,' Aunt Emily was saying as she strolled across the lawn with Lili towards the house and the carriage waiting out in front. 'She can declare her love before the world, or take whatever steps are necessary to prevent the kinds of situations that give rise to vicious slander. Frankly, I prefer the former.'

'Honestly?'

'No doubt about it. Why not do what serves you best? Eventually the truth of things reveals itself in any case. Much easier to speak your mind and have the man that you desire. Good heavens dear, so precious few are worth the bother.'

'Aunt Emily, you are outrageous.' Lili giggled at such candidness, adoring as she always had that very quality. 'But I, myself, could never be so bold. No woman I have ever known would dare to pit herself against the censure of polite society. That is, no woman other than yourself.'

'Is that a fact?' Dark, laughing eyes flashed mischief from the shadow of a bonnet brim. 'And what do you suppose Victoria was doing with your brother Charles last night? You don't expect they whiled away the hours till nearly dawn discussing Lili Osborn and the Reverend, do you?'

'Surely you are jesting,' Lili burst into a fit of giggling.

'My brother Charles? And Miss Victoria? Will wonders never cease ...'

'Of course I cannot swear to it, sequestered as I was up in my chamber, but your Uncle Avery and I have little doubt that those two reached a very basic understanding in the course of the evening. And, if you've no objection to my saying so, you could do worse, far worse than Andrew Baker, if the man is only half so wonderful as you describe.'

'Oh, that he is, and more,' she blurted. 'One has only to set eyes upon him to perceive ...'

'Well then, why hesitate?'

'You know the answer to that question,' Lili answered. 'If the truth should come to light ...'

'You worry far too much, my dear,' Aunt Emily replied and stepped into the carriage. 'We are all the same in God's eyes are we not? What woman does not have her secrets? When the time is right there's nothing to prevent you from revealing yours. If Reverend Baker's worth his salt they'll be of little consequence. Be grateful, darling. Love has found you. "Set your course and forge ahead!" as Uncle Avery would say.' Her voice dropped to a whisper as she leaned out of the carriage. 'There is only happiness to gain from it. Happiness with someone you love is worth far more than the approval of a hundred stuffy planters and their wives.' She winked and settled back onto the leather bench.

'I do not think I'd ever have the nerve to tell him,' Lili started, but her words were lost beneath the clattering of carriage wheels returning Emily to Allamanda Hall.

The thought that she must break the promise made to Andrew had tormented her all night and hounded her through half the morning. Sharing what was on her mind with Emily had helped to ease the tension temporarily, but nothing actually had changed. Attempting to forget, to concentrate on something else, she walked towards the fields to watch the Great Gang loading cane into the oxcarts. Still there was no peace, no



respite from the vision of those children with their huge eyes turned towards her with pleading. They were crying out for an end to hopelessness, for a touch of kindness in their wretched lives. And there were other feelings to be dealt with: her attraction to Andrew Baker. Somehow she'd felt as though she might find peace with him, find the perfect answer to her needs in loving him and helping him to build the mission and make it flourish. Now it seemed all hope was lost, that such a thing could ever come to pass.

'Miss Lili! Missy Osborn!'

'What is it?' she demanded as the housemaid, Diligence, came running up.

'A vis-i-tor,' the girl announced. 'Is *buckra*-man come callin' on de Missy, name of Massa Baker. Gots him yella hair an' eyes so green! Me say him dat de Missy gone out from de house, dat maybe bes' him comin' back anudder time. But him jus' wan' fe stay dere, hopin' dat she come along.'

'That's quite all right . . . I'll see him,' Lili answered, waiting for the pounding in her chest to cease, her thoughts to clarify before she started towards the house. 'Run back and tell him I am coming presently,' she murmured, trying to imagine what she'd say. How could she tell him they must not be seen together, that they must abandon all their plans, without revealing at the same time the reality of what she felt? How could she survive the knowledge that she was about to turn away the one alliance that she most desired in all the world? If only Charles had gone to Andrew first and paved the way . . .

The sight of him, broad shoulders straining at the fabric of his frock coat as he reached towards a row of bookshelves, stopped her at the entrance to the library and brought a tightness to her throat. Somehow it seemed so natural for him to be here. It felt so comfortable to have a man about this huge old house. If only things were different . . .

Lili took a step inside and, hearing her, he turned.

Their eyes met and for many moments neither said a word, content to feast upon the sight of one another, reaching out, communicating with no need for speech. Finally, his cheeks appeared to pale, his eyes to flicker with discomfort.

'Mister Rutland came to see me.' Andrew's voice, an arid whisper, floated through the shaded room.

'I see,' said Lili. 'Then you know.'

'I do. And I have come to offer my apologies.'

'No, don't! How could you possibly have guessed that something of this nature would result?'

'But you're the one who'll suffer most for it.'

'No,' Lili said. 'Not really. Idle gossip fades with time. What bothers me the most, of course, is that the children will not have their classroom.'

'But they shall. Charles Rutland was kind enough to offer his assistance.'

'Did he?' Lili smiled. 'How sweet of Charles. But then that is his nature.'

'He seems very fond of you.' There was a question there, disturbance underlying Andrew's statement.

'We've been friends since both of us were children.'

'Oh ... I would have thought it something more.'

'No, no, just friends.' She watched him closely, waiting for the worry in his eyes to fade. 'At least the children will not have to be deprived.'

'Of course. That's wonderful ... a blessing.' Andrew glanced away as awkward silence seemed to shout what neither of them dared to mention. 'I suppose I should be going now,' he managed finally. 'There's really nothing more to say.'

He nodded solemnly, moved to a table for his hat and strode across the floor. But when he reached the door he turned.

'May I address you candidly?'

'Of course,' she answered, sagging with relief as he stepped back into the room.

'Much as I'm grateful for the use of Allamanda Hall, I cannot help but feel your own participation was inspired

- if you'll permit me to express it - by some personal necessity; a quest perhaps, some need you were attempting to fulfil.'

'You are a man of vast perception, Andrew,' Lili turned away, unnerved that he had seemed to read her thoughts.

'That you will not have satisfied that need disturbs me greatly.'

'It appears then that there are two of us in need, if you'll permit me to express it.' There, she'd said it - loosed it from her heart into the open.

'You are accurate in that,' he answered. 'I have thought of little else all night. God's work is difficult and often lonely. That there might be someone here to share it with ...' He paused. 'We ministers are only human, you must realise.'

'Then 'tis loneliness that makes you speak this way.' Cruel disappointment brought a tightening to her throat.

'Forgive me. I am not accustomed to discussing matters of the heart. But when I saw the way you acted with those little ones and their response to you ...' He paused, the colour rising to his cheeks. 'You are a special person, Miss Lili, and there's something quite extraordinary in your gift - a calling, if you will.'

His view of her in such exalted terms sent shivers down her spine.

'I'm flattered, honoured by your high regard, but honestly, you do not know me. There are things ...'

'In each of us, dear lady. We are all imperfect creatures searching for salvation. Perhaps it was intended that we meet that we might serve each other and, in doing so, serve God.'

*'I do not care that she is entertainin'. I shall see the lady now!'*

The sound of Patrick's voice reverberated through the house. 'So, Miss. Where have ya got 'im hidden?' he demanded from the doorway.

Lili gaped in silence, flabbergasted. 'Mister Sloane, I've no idea what you are speaking of.'

'Of course y'don't,' he snapped sarcastically.

'Now see here, Sir,' Andrew, stepped in front of Lili. 'You may see yourself an injured party, but you've got no cause to take that tone when speaking to a lady.'

'And who might y'be?' demanded Patrick.

'Reverend Baker,' Andrew said, and looked directly into Patrick's eyes.

'Ahah! I might've guessed I'd find the likes o'her consortin' with another troublemaker.'

'Mister Sloane. What right have you to force your way into my home?' cried Lili.

'As if y'didn't know,' he snarled. 'You've taken what is mine. Y'shall not get away with it. I'll find that nigger slave if it's the last thing that I do. And as for you ...' he turned towards Andrew, 'I don't know y'r business at Bonnaire, but you'd best keep y'r preachin' far from Oxford Hall unless you've got a healthy appetite f'r bullets.'

'That is quite enough!' cried Lili. 'I insist you leave immediately, Mister Sloane. Perhaps another time when you are in the full possession of your manners ...'

'Very well. But you've not heard the last o'this,' he yelled and stormed away into the gallery.

'Godless creature,' Andrew growled. 'Tis only fear of God's displeasure that prevents me from ...'

'No, Andrew, please. Don't even think of it.'

'But 'tis not suitable that he abuse you so.'

The fire in his eyes was savage, animal. Observing this, she had to turn away, unable to endure the thought that she had been the cause of it, or to consider where it all might lead.

'I think you'd better go now.'

'And permit you to remain alone?'

'Tis best you not concern yourself with my affairs.'

'But how can I do otherwise?'

'Please go back to the mission.'

Andrew flinched, leaned towards her and then backed away. 'If that is your desire so be it, Lili. But I beg you to consider my words. They were sincere and everlasting.' For a moment he stood silent, hopeful, waiting for her to reply. 'Until the next time then,' he said, conceding finally and starting for the door.

She was barely able to stand still until she heard his bootheels on the front verandah steps. The memory of Andrew's words and the images that they evoked were more painful to her for the fact that marriage to the man was utterly impossible. Trembling, in tears, she hurried to her room and flung herself facedown across the bed to weep. She despised what she was, desiring only what she wasn't, knowing she could never give herself to Andrew lest he learn the truth one day and hate her for deceiving him.

'So! Is true den!'

Bobbie Norton's angry voice spun her round and drained the colour from her cheeks. 'What are you saying?' she protested as she stared up into wild eyes, observed the tight set of his jaw, the flaring nostrils so ill-suited to the quiet, gentle man that she had known.

'Not sweet-mouth Bobbie Norton one more time!'

'Oh Bobbie, please,' she begged, dismayed as she realised suddenly what Cuba must have told him. 'You cannot believe such things. You must not think that I would lie to you.'

'Liah! Whore!' he shouted. 'Everybody sayin' bout Miss Lili in de town dis day, an' laughin' how de fancy *buckra*-lady from Bonnaire be foolin' wid de preacher man.'

'Oh Bobbie, no. It isn't true.'

'Is got to be. Me mumma say me yesterday how Missy ride off quick widdout fe even waitin' on me comin' from de Bay. She say me how de Missy hurryin' an' now me knows de cause.' A veil of misery descended, tightening his forehead, thickening his voice. 'What for de Missy lies to Bobbie? Why she say him all dem ting fe start him

tinkin' maybe sometin' change, dat someone have a care if him be livin', dyin' ...?'

'It was not a lie. I swear it.' Lili groaned, her body stiffening with terror. 'Cuba ordered me to leave, insisted it would be the best thing I could do for you.'

'Not tell dem lies on Cuba! Bobbie hear you when Missy talkin' sweet wid him an' sayin' all dem ting, same like she say wid Bobbie.' Glowering, he started towards her, breathing heavily. 'Now say me 'gain how Missy feel fe Bobbie,' he demanded, mocking her.

She watched the fury in his eyes take on a special urgency, and recognised where this was leading. 'Bobbie, no!' she cried as he stepped menacingly towards the bed. 'The things I said to you were true. I promise. You are angry now but if you'll stop to listen and permit me to explain ...'

'No more! We finish foolin' Bobbie Norton. Now him wan' a ting, him takes it!' Iron fingers closed around her shoulders, forcing her down flat upon the mattress.

'Bobbie, no!' she wailed above the sound of fabric tearing. 'Stop this, now, I beg of you.'

'You tink we animals? You tink de coloured man no differen' den de puppy dog to play wid, den to chase away? Now Bobbie shows de fine white lady what she gets fe how she do.'

Her vision seemed to blur and then it was as if she were in darkness suddenly as Bobbie hovered over her, his chest and shoulders blocking out the light. She felt him thrusting, plunging, battering her with his rage.

She did not know how long she'd lain there, face turned to the wall, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Tentatively, timidly, she listened for some sound of him, too frightened to turn round lest he should see her moving, rally, and repeat the horrid punishment.

Silence.

It was over but for bruised and aching flesh tormenting her, reminding her, berating her for what she'd caused a

simple man to do. But more than pain, beyond humiliation, she was conscious of her own susceptibility, the fact of being unprotected in this house. Who knew what else might happen to her if she stayed? Might there not very well be others just like Bobbie Norton, Patrick Sloane, who'd see her as an enemy and seek their vengeance at Bonnaire?

She could not bear the thought of it, could not remain here any longer at the mercy of whomever walked in through the gates. Obsessed, near to hysteria, she yanked the bellpull on the wall, intent on having a bath, to wash away the evidence of what had happened and to make herself presentable again. For now she realised that there really was no choice for her. She must go to Andrew and, if he still wanted her, be his.

## 17

Pomelia slipped out through the back door of the mansion. Trembling, agonised, she moved across the grass and past the kitchen house, concerned lest someone see her hurrying, become suspicious and report her movements later when the Massa came back from Bonnaire. Concealed at last by leafy boughs of breadfruit trees, she hurried round the flower garden, through a wood rail gate and down the grassy incline towards the hot house where she'd kept her treasure hidden.

Moans of anguish, cries of terror from within the wooden structure seemed to underscore the misery, the horror of her own condition. Vowing not to lose her nerve, Pomelia glanced about, assured herself that no one else was watching and proceeded to the farthest corner of the building. Kneeling there she eased away a section of the latticework that covered the foundation and burrowed into soft, cool earth.

Just as her fingers closed around the little bag she'd buried there, Pomelia heard someone approaching from the other side. Resisting panic, she concealed the pouch inside her bodice, dropped onto her belly, shimmied backward and crawled into a mass of foliage beside the building. Hidden there, she held her breath and peered into the open.

On the porch stood Juliett, a gunnysack clutched in her fingers while her other hand tapped lightly at the door. Pomelia watched the portal open, heard a hurried interchange of whispering and saw the parcel disappear inside, but not before she realised what must surely be within it.

'Pssst! Juliett!' Pomelia whispered as the girl passed close in front of her. She reached out, grabbed a forearm, pulled the girl down with her into hiding.

'You sees it den.' A wicked, knowing smirk relaxed the corners of her mouth as Juliett crouched down beside Pomelia. 'Massa an' dem *buckras* soon be sorry fe dem ting dey do.'

'You bring dem neggas *guns*?' Pomelia said, unable to believe it.

'From the storehouse. Plenty time me watch de *bush* put dem dere an' hide de key behin' de water cannon. Now dem *buckras* gets a big surprise.'

'Foolish gal!' Pomelia snapped.

A faraway expression suddenly appeared in Juliett's eyes; soft, silken features hardening to mercilessness. 'Maybe Massa dead dis day,' she rasped. 'Den we never gots a worry 'bout dat *buckra*-man no more.'

'De Massa not be up dere now,' Pomelia said. 'Him fin' Tacooma missin' an' him rides off to Bonnaire fe ask Miss Lili 'bout de ting.'

The gravity of this erased the smugness from the girl's expression. 'Tink you dat de Massa fin' him dere an' bring Tacooma back in Oxford Hall?'

Pomelia shivered at the thought of it. 'Me goin' mad fe wonderin',' she rasped, then paused as inspiration came to her. 'You gots to help to do a ting fe Pommie,' she



implored. 'Run t'rough de woods dere to Bonnaire an' fin' Tacooma. Say him how dat *buckra's* comin', lookin' fe him slave.'

Juliett gaped fearfully. 'Is maybe bes' we goes togedder, fin' Tacooma an' climb up into dem mountain?'

'No. Me gots to be here when de Massa come, so him not wonderin'.' Pomelia stood up in the bushes, glancing worriedly in the direction of the hot house. 'Quick now, go 'fore sometin' else is happen!' Panicky, preoccupied, she did not wait for Juliett to answer. Picturing those slaves inside with guns, imagining them racing to the mansion, shooting as they ran, she hurried back towards the high ground, unaware that Juliett was following.

No sooner had she come around the corner of the Great House than Pomelia heard the sound of Billy Austin calling out her name. She forced herself to face him, smiling innocently.

'Where y'comin' from in such a blasted hurry?'

'Pommie lookin' fe dem kitchen gals what should be fixin' johnnycakes fe supper,' she replied eyes lowered deferentially.

'Y'sure about that?' he continued, stepping closer.

The necessity to answer him was mercifully removed by hoofbeats thundering along the drive. Pomelia watched the overseer hurry off, then sagged against an orange tree, relieved to see that Massa had returned alone.

'Did ya find 'im?' someone teased as he dismounted and proceeded up the stairs.

'Damned Osborn woman's got 'im hidden somewhere. I am sure of it!' he barked, and flung his hat into a chair.

Pomelia tiptoed up the steps and eased her way into the crowd. As though she'd been there all the while she poured a goblet full of sangaree and brought it to him. 'Massa like fe sometin' cool to drink?' she managed, offering the glass and smiling timidly.

'They're laughin' at me,' Patrick growled. 'You'd better think again, girl, and provide some information that'll prove Miss Lili's guilt.'

'Me not know nothin', Sah!' Pomelia trembled violently. 'Me watchin' on dat man jus' how de Massa say me ...'

Sudden shouting split the air. 'The slaves! They've broke out of the hot house,' Billy Austin bellowed, dashing up the stairs. 'They're headin' this way and they're armed with rifles.'

Pandemonium broke loose. Chairs toppled, crystal goblets and pitchers crashed to the floorboards as the planters raced around in panic.

'This way, quick. Into the house!' cried Patrick. 'You come 'ere with me.' He grabbed Pomelia by the wrist to drag her indoors after him, across the gallery towards a huge, glass-fronted arms chest.

'Everybody take a gun and place yerselves afore the windows,' he commanded, tossing muskets into waiting hands.

Cold steel was thrust against Pomelia's palm. 'Don't stand there gapin', girl!' he ordered. 'Take some bullets and ...'

'No, Massa, please. Me never use a ting like dat before!'

'You'd better learn, and fast.' Strong fingers dug into her shoulders and shoved her towards the windows.

Suddenly the air exploded with the sharp report of rifle fire and the cries of battle as the mutineers approached the house. Pomelia stumbled to a window, horrified to see a dozen negroes racing up with weapons fixed in her direction. Frozen in her tracks, she watched a man leap to the railing, aim his gun, then fly into the air, his body twisting, jerking wildly as a bullet slammed into his head and split his skull into a hundred pieces. Whimpering, hysterical, she spun around and raced upstairs to Patrick's bedroom, palms against her ears in a desperate attempt to still the sounds of people murdering each other.

Fifteen minutes later it was finished, eerie silence mantling the house as thickly as the smell of powder in the air. Pomelia slunk out of the chamber, shuddering at what she was about to see, yet just as frightened by the

thought of Massa Patrick finding out she'd disobeyed him.

'So, you've chosen to rejoin us. Just in time t'see what's happened t'yer friends.'

Pomelia gulped, attempting to reply. But words were an impossibility as Patrick aimed his gun at her and motioned her outside.

The lawn was strewn with the bodies of dead and dying. Near the stairs a group of wretched black men quaked upon their knees as Billy Austin stood above them, leering nastily, his rifle pointed at their heads.

'Good Lord, we might have all been killed!' a white man said as Patrick stepped out into view. 'Now where in blazes d'ya think they got them guns?'

'I couldn't answer that,' said Patrick. 'But perhaps there's someone here who can.' He jabbed the muzzle painfully into Pomelia's ribs.

'Me not know nothin' bout the ting!' she screamed.

'Then why was it I saw ya runnin'?' Billy shouted from below. 'A little while ago as Mister Sloane was ridin' up? She could've been returnin' from the hot house,' he continued, speaking now to Patrick and the others. 'No doubt, she's the one what stole them guns!'

Pomelia glanced around as all eyes turned in her direction. 'No,' she rasped. 'Me never do a ting like dat! Pomelia be a good slave all dem year, do nothin' make de Massa cross.'

'But something that would make the master dead. Well, that's a different story, eh?'

She knew that he'd already judged her guilty. 'No,' Pomelia groaned. 'Me waitin' fe de Massa come back safe fe give him dis.' She thrust a hand into her bodice, yanked the little bag out into view.

'The money that them niggers paid 'er fer them guns, no doubt,' cried Billy as a spray of gold fell to the floor.

'No, no, dis money what Pomelia savin' all dem year.'

'A slave owns nothin'!' Patrick grabbed the pouch. 'Y're mine an' *this* is mine,' he said pocketing the bag. 'Tell me now, where did ya get the gold? Confess!'

'Is mine, me sayin' you!' Pomelia whined, then jumped away as Patrick slapped her viciously.

'Damned coloureds never tell the truth,' he growled and grabbed her by the hair. 'Here, Billy. Take 'er with them others,' he commanded, forcing her ahead of him and down the stairs. 'Perhaps a visit to the workhouse will improve this nigger's memory!'

Brooding, ill at ease, Tacooma shuffled through the shadows of the old abandoned windmill where Mirtilla had been hiding him since his return from Oxford Hall. Through half the night and all this morning he had paced in circles, feeling antiquated, out-of-date just like those worn, decaying cogwheels and the crusty coppers draped with cobwebs. With all his heart he longed to race back through the woods and pull-foot with Pomelia to the mountains. He yearned to escape to some other town across the island, anywhere that they might live together, unmolested.

*What had happened to that woman? Why had she not come to him - sent word, at least?*

Tacooma flopped onto a pallet near the wall beside a tray of breakfast dishes left there by Mirtilla. Gnawing emptiness inside his belly told him he should try to eat, but even as he reached out for the food he knew that it was useless. Edgy, out-of-sorts, he got back to his feet and ambled through an archway to the sun beyond.

The vista out of doors, as always, set his pulsebeat racing, reaffirming life's vitality. Tacooma stretched, inhaled deeply, savouring the salty bite of sea air in his lungs, the warmth of sunshine on his flesh. At least these things remained the same, he thought, remembering how he had dreamed of moments such as this on snowy days in England. Guinea-grass beneath his feet; the sounds of parrots in the branches, life's small pleasures that no *buckra* could deny him.

Sudden movement on a hilltop caught his notice. Leaping down behind a tree stump, fingers cupped above his eyes, Tacooma peered across the meadow,

following the progress of two women coming into view.

No sooner did he recognise Mirtilla's portly form and red bandanna than he jumped from hiding, raced across the field then stopped midway, immobilised by terror-stricken looks upon the women's faces. 'Auntie? Missy Juliett? What be de matter?' he demanded, running over to them.

'Is de Massa Patrick,' Mirtilla gasped. 'Him knows you gone!'

'Him come back dere in Oxford Hall an' blame Pomelia dat you 'scapel' cried Juliett. 'Him tinkin' she de one what bring guns fe dem slave what's rise up in de hot house dere, what tries to kill dem *buckras* an' go free.'

Tacooma's glance rebounded in confusion from one woman to another as they babbled heatedly. 'Me gots to go dere and fin' Pomelia,' he announced and turned, about to leave.

Mirtilla's fingers closed around his wrist. 'Not go in Oxford Hall,' she warned. 'Is full of *buckra*-men wid guns.'

'Me gots to go,' he wailed.

'No sense in dat,' said Juliett. 'De Massa sen' Pomelia 'way. Him put she in de workhouse.'

The earth and sky began to spin around him as the impact of her words took hold. Tacooma shook his head, determined he would not succumb.

'Me needs a horse,' he thought aloud, withdrawing from Mirtilla.

'Where you goin'?' she challenged him. 'If Massa Patrick see you in de road ...'

'Is no one see,' he snapped. 'Tacooma goin' in dem mountain to Ashanti Town an' Auntie Fushabahl' With that he turned and raced in the direction of the stables, leaving both of them to stare in utter disbelief behind him.

He had been a fugitive before, pursued by *buckras* sworn to take his life, and so he knew exactly what to do. Disguised in ragged clothes, his features hidden underneath a hat weaved out of palm fronds, he rode slowly to

the outskirts of Bonnaire, beyond the canefields, and into the foothills where a trail began. It was a narrow, winding path that climbed through treacherous terrain up to the Cockpit country and the secret village of Ashanti Town. Ignoring swarms of insects and air too hot to breathe, he urged the horse along a narrow precipice that faced out over miles of verdant valleys, through a rocky gorge and finally into a wooded glen where rushing water laughed its way across smooth stones. Allowing just a moment for the two of them to drink, he grasped the reins and led the animal along the shallow stream for these, the last few miles up to his destination.

Being here, returning to this place, was like a voyage back through time, a bittersweet reunion with the forces that had shaped his life. Adrift in memory, Tacooma tiptoed past an old silk cotton tree that had been hollowed out by lightning, fearful, as in childhood days, to peer into its branches lest the *duppies* living there became enraged and showered him with stones. Heart pumping wildly, he continued past a clearing in the woods, his nostrils picking out familiar scents that lingered in the air: sharp traces of a recent fire and pungent incense that bespoke the presence of the Sky God, *Nyankupon*; the alchemy of his disciple upon earth, *Okomfo*, priestess, Auntie Fushabah. What magic was she up to now? he wondered. And would it be of a nature that would come into conflict with his own, important plans?

So lost was he in contemplation that Tacooma did not sense the presence of others watching him intently until, all at once, they leaped out into view, their fierce cries of battle shattering the air as naked bodies swung down from the trees or emerged from leafy thickets, muskets, knives, poised at the ready.

'*Memeneda Koromantee!*' Tacooma shouted, grinning at them, greeting strangers as familiar to his heart as his own image of himself.

'Tacooma? Is dat you fe sure?'

He recognised the voice at once and spun in its direction, arms outstretched, eyes bright with fellowship. 'Quaco Thombo! Yes! Is me, Tacooma, come fe see him Auntie!'

The man walked up to him, old eyes aglow with understanding. 'Sure, *Okomfo* say dis happen, dat Tacooma comin' once again fe be here wid him people. All de time she prayin' on it, askin' in de night fe Baddu bring him back.'

The mention of his mother's name evoked a thousand memories of days gone by when all of them were slaves together at Bonnaire. Long moments passed when neither man could speak before Tacooma nodded, smiling wistfully. 'Me sees me Auntie now,' he murmured, focusing again upon considerations of the present.

He found her in the stool house, on her knees before the altar. Spotting her, Tacooma waited in the doorway, hesitant to interrupt a prayer, unable with her back towards him to ascertain the level of her consciousness.

'Tacooma here fe see him Auntie,' she proclaimed, eyes forward, able nonetheless to see in all directions.

'Is so,' he answered, shuddering inside himself to contemplate her powers, fearful lest she grow suspicious of his motives. 'Auntie right in what she sayin', jus' like all dem udder time.' He flattered her, pretending to concede, and stepped into the dimness.

'Not jus' Auntie. Is de Sky God bring Tacooma back.' She reached to fondle something in the shadows.

Tacooma's gaze moved with her fingers to the *suman* on the floor - the twigs and leaves tied up with string - a special fetish bound and blessed to aid her causes. Shivering, he recognised a length of linen bandage that she must have stolen when she came to visit at Bonnaire. 'Is done. Me here now,' he responded, dropping to his knees then settling upon his haunches next to her.

She turned to scrutinise his face as though she could not quite believe this miracle herself. 'You see de sense in

what you Auntie sayin' now? You here to do de right ting fe you people?

'Yes,' Tacooma answered, knowing he must not display the slightest hesitation to comply lest she perceive the secrets of his heart.

The ancient face relaxed at last, reshaping round a toothless grin. 'Me tells dem udders,' she announced and jumped onto her feet, revitalised, a girl again in spirit. 'Gots to show de new ones jus' be comin' here dat *Nyankupon* still wid us. Dat Him sen' Tacooma fe de one what leads we.'

'Is good we say dem so,' he answered, following as Fushabah began to hurry towards the door, delighted for this chance to meet the rest and judge which ones among them would be fit and ready to go with him when he rode out of the mountains to Pomelia's rescue.

## 18

It was a month since she had been with Charles, and Victoria could not understand his silence. Nervous, insecure, she moved about the flower garden, snipping blossoms with a vengeance, tortured by the questions that had plagued her every waking moment: had he not been satisfied with her? Was his desire a pretence, and his passion a manoeuvre meant to turn her thoughts from Lili Osborn?

She had felt so certain then, so thoroughly convinced that she'd beguiled him, that she'd even gone so far as to permit herself to plan her future with the man. In fantasy she had imagined what it would be like to be free of Father and the mistress of a home where she could do exactly as she pleased. Of course, Charles Rutland could



not hold a candle to the gentlemen she'd known in London or be half so thrilling as James White, the man whom she'd adored, but even this she could accept so long as he remained the ardent lover and pursued his other interests in the daytime.

Should she send a note – invent some reason, possibly, to see him once again?

'Missy Victorial' Juliatt's voice commanded her attention. 'Massa callin'. Say me bring de Missy in de house!'

'Oh, very well,' Victoria replied, relinquishing her hold upon a basket filled with morning glories, sprays of oleander. 'Take these to my room.' She peeled her gloves off, tossed them to the girl and started for the house.

'Victoria m'girl, y're back at last,' her father's voice resounded from the doorway. 'Quickly now, m'dear, there's someone here I know you'll want t'see. I'm sure y'must remember Edmund, Earl of ...'

'Certainly. Of course she does,' a man's voice burst effusively as he came waddling into view, his clothing much too tight, too heavily embroidered for his figure or the climate. 'I'd the singular delight of making Miss Victoria's acquaintance just a few short weeks ago when we returned from Spanish Town.'

'How could I possibly forget?' she interrupted, turning from the powdered wig and pebble teeth, the paunch encased with minimal success. 'How nice to have you back with us at Oxford Hall,' she managed, hurrying for sanctuary towards a table near the balustrade spread with drink and tidbits.

'An honour, actually, because the Earl's visit has entirely t'do with you.' Her father grasped Victoria covertly by an elbow, forced her round and back again in the direction of the other man.

'Indeed?' She side-stepped neatly to escape his hold. 'And how is that, if I might ask?'

Two beady eyes gleamed bright with lechery as Edmund spoke. 'Forgive me if it sounds presumptuous,

but Patrick has agreed for you to be my hostess at a small soirée I'm planning, Tuesday next.'

'Presumptuous? She'd be delighted,' Patrick crowed.

Victoria smiled tightly, wishing she could cut her father's tongue out. 'Certainly I would. Regrettably, however, 'tis the very evening I am promised to the Ladies' Poetry Society. You must remember, Father, 'Twas at your insistence I agreed to join.'

'I knew I should have asked it sooner!' Edmund said sorrowfully.

'Oh dear, if only I had known you would,' Victoria exclaimed. 'A few days earlier and I'd have been so pleased to answer you in the affirmative.'

'And so y'shall in any case!' barked Patrick. 'You shall cancel that commitment. Certainly y'r ladyfriends will understand. I'll tend t'them m'self, if need be.'

'I daresay there's no man on this island better suited to the task of soothing ladies' feelings,' Edmund added, smiling as he realised he would have his way.

' 'Tis settled then,' said Patrick. 'Now, m'friend, if you would care to step into the dining room, Victoria and I shall join you presently for second breakfast.'

'How dare you,' Victoria exploded just as soon as he had entered the house. 'Of all the nerve. To pledge me to the service of that aging ... powdered ... *twit*.'

'Now listen here,' said Patrick, 'were ya half so canny as y'try t'be you'd put the man's infatuation t'good use. He's very rich and owns a score of merchant ships.'

'I do not care how rich he is. I'll not be auctioned off the way you sell your nigger slaves.'

'You'll do exactly as I tell you to, Victoria. The man is worth a fortune and his wife's been dead at least a year.'

'I see. And now you've got me married to him, have you?'

'And why not, if he desires it? With twenty ships and who knows how many factors eager to extend him credit, we could do far worse.'

'I doubt it,' she replied. 'But we will never know in any

case. I shall not go with him and that is final.'

'Do not test me, lass. This is no time t'try y'r father's patience. You'll obey m'wishes, d'ya understand?'

'And if I don't?'

'I'll cut ya loose without a farthing.'

'You wouldn't dare!'

'Don't wager on it. Best t'march y'rself inside an' try t'act the lady - if ya still remember how.'

She glared defiance at him, trying to withstand the ultimatum in his eyes then melting, shrinking back into herself as she perceived the limitations of her circumstances. Choking on her rage she whirled and strode in through the doorway, searching frantically for some alternative, already scheming, seeking her revenge and swearing to herself that she would pay her father back for this, tenfold!

Crouched in darkness, shivering with damp, Pomelia watched her thoughts parade across her field of vision, trying to ignore the groans of agony, the stench of filth fouling the air. She had been taken with the negroes who had tried to overrun the Great House to the magistrate - a friend of Massa Patrick - who had sentenced all of them to the workhouse at St. Ann's Bay for an indeterminate amount of time. As far as she could tell there was but one law governing the life of prisoners: they were there to satisfy Sam Tucker's greed. Maniacal, obsessed, this man had managed to create a profitable situation out of circumstances that would surely have dissuaded other men with weaker stomachs from the job. His scheme was simple, unobtrusive and as ruthless as the man himself: instead of working in the compound, gangs of labourers were sent to till the fields of influential planters in exchange for which not only was Sam Tucker paid a handsome fee, but reinstated, year to year, in his position of authority.

Luckily, Pomelia had been able to avoid the driver's notice, keeping to herself, behaving unobtrusively, remaining camouflaged among the others in the penal

gang whenever he came into sight. At least, till yesterday.

*'You come into m'room tomorrow, bright an' early, else y're gonna dance the mill f'sure!'* Sam Tucker had informed her when he'd come upon Pomelia bent above a horse trough, trying desperately to wash away the dirt she'd gathered from a day spent pulling weeds out of a canefield.

The ultimatum echoing across her mind and sudden, violent thirst aroused Pomelia from reflection. Grimacing with pain she tried to rise, then stopped abruptly, anchored by a heavy weight around her wrist.

*'Jenny Prue?'* she whispered to the woman who'd been shackled to her yesterday when they'd been locked in for the night. *'You sleepin' still? Pomelia needs fe get some drinkin' water in de bucket, dere.'*

No answer, just the cold, metallic rattling of chains.

Pomelia reached out in the darkness, felt her way around the handcuffs and along the iron links attached to them, then froze, repelled by cold and clammy flesh, stiff fingers clasped around an empty calabash. A vision from the past, her father lying dead at Massa Patrick's feet, appeared in her mind and she erupted into high pitched screams of terror.

*'Jenny dead! Dis woman gone!'* Pomelia shrieked.

A dozen voices echoed the alarm, waking the others. Suddenly the outcry ended, quelled by heavy footsteps and the sound of a wooden door swinging open.

Pomelia squinted towards the entrance, shrinking backward as she recognised Sam Tucker, naked but for boots and britches, heavy muscles silhouetted in the eerie light of dawn.

*'What's all the noise in here?'*

*'Dis woman die here in de night!'* Pomelia felt the little hairs stand up along her neck to think that she was shackled to a corpse.

The driver scratched the mat of hair across his chest. *'One dead nigger's no excuse f'r all this yellin'. Wait awhile and I shall send someone t'fetch the body.'* Yawning loudly, he stepped back as though to leave.

'No, *please*.' Pomelia cried out frantically. 'Not make me stay like dis tied up wid she.'

The driver turned. A sly expression on his face disclosed that he'd expected this response. 'And would ya rather come outside with me then?' he tormented, grinning towards the helpless woman quaking on her knees.

Pomelia nodded dully. 'Anyting, Sah. Jus' so me not stayin' here.'

'In that case ...' Mister Tucker moved into the dungeon, reaching for his keys.

Only vaguely did she feel his fingers locked around her arm, propelling her beyond the doorway, through the yard in the direction of his quarters. Blinded by the daylight, thoughts still fixed on Jenny Prue, Pomelia let herself be moved along, not realising what lay ahead of her until she found herself confronted by Sam Tucker's bed.

He shut the door behind them, licked his lips and reached down for the topmost button of his britches. 'Very well then, let's get on with it,' he said, eyes focused on Pomelia's heaving bosom.

She turned, inched backward, gasping as a cold stone wall pressed against her shoulders. 'Massa, please. Not punish Pommie so.'

'I'm doin' ya a favour, girl. There's plenty I could have f'r just the snappin' of a finger.'

'Yes, is so.' Pomelia nodded, choking on her terror. 'Plenty what be pleasurin' de Massa better.'

'You're the one I want t'day. Now, are ya gonna come t'me or ...'

'No!' The truth was out before she had a chance to find some method of distracting him.

'So, y'think Sam Tucker isn't good enough f'r one of Patrick Sloane's rebellious niggers!' Furious, he moved in her direction, stalking her around the little cubicle until he'd backed her, finally, into a corner. Breathing heavily, excitement emanating from his flesh, he placed his fingers round her neck. 'And just what is it makes

y'think you're any better than the other gals who pleasure me? And what makes you think that I'm givin' ya the choice anyway?'

'Is not de man what make dis world; is not de man command it. Him dat make de world is comin' to receive it, name of Jesus Christ.'

Pomelia's sharp, unlikely outburst shocked them both to silence. Caught off balance, startled by the words, Sam Tucker let his fingers drop down to his sides, stepped back a pace to scrutinise the woman.

Instantly, reflexively, Pomelia ducked around him, raced across the room and flew out of the doorway. Wild with fear, too terrified to scream, she ran across the compound searching desperately for a place where she could hide.

He overtook her from behind, two hundred pounds thrown into motion as he tackled her, imprisoned her within his arms and dragged her with him to the parched and dusty earth. They rolled together, limbs entangled, tumbling over one another till at last he'd pinned her on her back.

'There's ... no ... way ... out,' he panted, glaring down at her, a wide-eyed, frenzied grin attesting to the force of his obsession. 'If ya fight 'twill only make the challenge that much more excitin' t'me.' Growling hungrily, he moved to crush her lips beneath his own.

Pomelia twisted round, attempting to escape and felt a tooth graze tender, unprotected flesh.

'Damn nigger wench,' the driver yelled and jumped away from her.

A scarlet trickle glistened at the corner of his mouth. Pomelia watched, dumbstruck with horror as he touched a finger to the wound then held his hand out, staring at the blood.

'All right, ya had y'r moment. Now I shall have mine,' he roared and lunged, thick fingers clamping round her forearms, twisting them behind her, forcing her back up onto her feet.

Half mad with panic, shivering with pain, Pomelia

was propelled across the yard and through a narrow doorway. Once inside she stopped her struggling, all the strength gone out of her as she observed the treadmill in the shadows.

'Massa, nol' Pomelia screamed as she was shoved across the room in its direction. But her cries and pleadings were to no avail; her only answer heavy breathing as Sam Tucker dragged her up onto the wooden platform running lengthways to the wheel.

'All right, stretch up there. Grab the pole,' he ordered, reaching for a pair of leather straps that hung in readiness.

Quivering with nausea, fighting not to swoon, she reached to grasp the rail placed overhead for just that purpose, wincing at the pain of leather bindings being tied around her wrists to hold her arms in place.

'Now let us see if you've a taste f'runnin', still,' Sam Tucker challenged, pulling on a lever.

Creaks and rumblings echoed through the chamber as the mill began to turn. Pomelia raised one foot and then the other, whimpering with apprehension as the speed increased.

'That's good, quite good,' he taunted, shouting to be heard above the groans of cogs and pulleys. 'I can see you've quite a bit o' spunk, m'girl.' He grinned up wickedly in her direction. 'Best we get them skirts out of the way lest ya become entangled.'

Groaning with the shame of it, Pomelia felt the tattered remnants of her gown yanked up onto her thighs, then tied behind her. Burning with humiliation she attempted to ignore the eyes that peered up underneath her dress, between her naked legs.

'Now let us see ya run again,' he barked and thrust the lever two more notches to the right.

The speed accelerated and Pomelia had to race in order to stay even with its frantic, lethal tempo. Streams of sweat ran down her face, along her sides, as she attempted the impossible, knees jerking high into the air, toes

touching down with barely time to find a foothold.

Suddenly, she missed a step and cried out as a wooden slat slammed brutally into her shins.

'Go faster, damn you,' yelled the driver, reaching towards a bracket on the wall.

The cat cut cruelly across her calves. Pomelia screamed and twisted in mid-air, unable to escape its deadly reach, then shrieked again as leather bit into her thighs.

'Now I shall pull the lever all the way,' Sam Tucker cried, caught up in wild, sadistic glee.

She felt the treadmill pick up speed again as though intent on cutting her to ribbons. Summoning her last reserve of strength Pomelia thrashed about and struggled desperately to find her footing.

It was useless. Slipping, skidding on the wood, she felt her legs fly out behind her and a wrenching pain obliterate the world as arms and shoulders strained to keep from separating in their sockets. Once again the wooden slats assaulted shins and knees, as though at any moment they would split the bones clean through.

She opened up her mouth to scream but nothing came and suddenly her eyes began to blur.

'You'll dance the mill until y'drop,' Sam Tucker raged, his words demonic, shrill with madness, barely reaching her from some place out there in the haze. 'You'll not be teasin' white men any longer ...'

Suddenly his voice was gone, the treadmill slowing, growing softer to reveal the sounds of footsteps hurrying across the earthen floor in her direction. Gulping air into her lungs, Pomelia hung there helplessly, too weak to turn around, too stupefied to understand what was happening. Then she felt an arm around her waist supporting her, saw fingers reaching up to loose the bindings on her wrists.

'Hol' on dere, gal. Me takin' you out from dis place.'

The sound of it, those blessed words she'd heard so often in her dreams, was like a balm that soothed her, eased the tension from her soul. Whimpering, unable to



reply, Pomelia let herself go limp and slipped into the welcome darkness rushing up to overtake her - safe at last in the protection of Tacooma's arms.

As soon as it was possible Victoria feigned a headache and excused herself from table, leaving Father and Edmund to their endless talk of sugar cane and moneymaking. Panic-stricken, terrified, she slipped out through the back door, running for the stables. Father was in earnest she could see. Without a moment's hesitation he would hand her over to the highest bidder, unless, of course, she managed to do something in the interim to thwart his vile plans.

She drove her gig along the road and searched her mind for things to say so that her desperation would not show. Of course Charles wanted her, she told herself. This reticence could only be embarrassment; unnecessary shyness in the aftermath of having taken her into his bed. But she would put an end to his resistance, she resolved. Alone with him again she would bewitch him and enthrall him till his only thought was to possess her for eternity. And then, at last, she would be safe.

'Miss Sloane?' The houseboy, Cambridge, seemed surprised to find her at the door. 'What you be doin' here today?'

The question caught her momentarily off balance. 'I have come to ... visit Mister Rutland,' she replied, unnerved to find herself interrogated by a slave, resolving that these Africans would keep their place once she was mistress of this house. 'Is he inside?'

'No, Miss,' the boy responded, still confused. 'Him at de weddin', same like all dem udder *buckras* from dis place.'

'The wedding?' she replied. 'What wedding?'

'Is Miss Lili, marryin' de Reverend Massa Andrew Baker at Bonnaire today. Not you be goin' dere?'

But there was no reply. In moments she was back inside her carriage, racing wildly for Bonnaire.

Fiddle music and the lilt of gentle conversation floated

down to her on perfumed breezes as Victoria arrived. Abandoning her carriage at the bottom of the drive she started towards the Great House, loath to be observed without a proper escort, barely able to contain a sudden fury rising from within. How *dare* that Lili Osborn! she reflected, trembling and indignant. The little madam had certainly not wasted any time inveigling poor Andrew into marriage. Still, it made no difference she told herself, her features softening as she came round a bend and into sight of the festivities upon the lawn. If things went well today she soon would have a husband of her own.

The absolute necessity she felt for that to come about exploded into terrifying apprehension when she saw Charles Rutland on the front verandah, looking fit and peacock proud to be surrounded by a bevy of Trelawny Parish's most eligible, single ladies. Forcing her hysteria to yield before an iron will Victoria stepped closer, strolling across the grass, resolved to be the very image of conviviality.

'Victoria, what are you doing here?' Charles asked, when he had separated from the crowd, his manner tentative and tremulous.

'I wish to speak with you,' she answered, gratified to find the man defensive in her presence, counting on that very quality to help her re-establish her control of him. 'A lady can restrain herself for just so long.'

'But surely, this is not the time or place.'

'And what could be more suitable? A wedding. All the trappings of young love and romance. You do appreciate such things, dear Charles. May I assume as much, in truth?'

Her point did not go unacknowledged. Darkening about the collar, weakening perceptibly, Charles took her arm and drew her with him towards the far side of the lawn. 'Very well, but we shall have to keep our conversation brief or else I shall be missed.'

'And what of me?' she countered, irritated by the man's ill timed concern for other people's feelings. 'I have

missed you too these weeks gone by, or have you cast aside entirely the memory of the night we shared?'

Charles cleared his throat and turned the colour of hibiscus. 'I should have spoken with you sooner I suppose. In truth I was intending to communicate by letter.'

'Letter?' she repeated, queasy suddenly, uncertain of the man's intent. 'Indeed Charles, that sounds so formal, unless you had a *billet-doux* in mind,' she bantered, working for a touch of sweetness that might mitigate the tension in the air.

'Twas hardly that,' he answered stiffening and coming to a halt. 'What I'd intended to convey was something in the nature of farewell.'

'Indeed? And why? Have I done anything to anger you? I rather thought that we had reached an understanding.'

'So had I. And that is what displeases me.'

'Have I displeased you? In what way, might I inquire?'

'By spreading vicious slander - lies concerning Lili and the Reverend. 'Victoria, you *promised* me ...'

'Oh, *that*,' she answered, trying to make light of it.

'Twas nothing, really. Certainly no cause for you to treat me in this shameful manner.'

A weary sigh escaped his lips. Charles leaned against an almond tree and shook his head. 'Perhaps you do not understand, Victoria, but Lili has been close to me since childhood days. I could not possibly pursue the company of someone who would wilfully defame her.'

'So I see. And you would choose to end our friendship for that superficial reason?'

'Hardly superficial when you jeopardise a woman's honour,' Charles replied, his jawline set, blue eyes turned cold and steely grey with accusation.

All at once Victoria perceived her future crashing down in ruins; her hopes and dreams were evaporating right before her very eyes. 'If it is honour that you cherish so then I suggest you reconsider,' she admonished shrilly.

'I am sorry, but I cannot see you anymore.'

'Indeed you'll see a great deal more of me than you suspect. I came today to tell you I am going to have a child.'

Charles' mouth fell open. 'Are you certain of it?'

'Absolutely.'

'Certain it is mine, I mean.'

'How dare you!' she exploded, drawing breath for the harangue to follow.

'Victoria? Can that be you?'

The sound of Lili's voice immobilised Victoria, but only for a moment. Glancing pointedly at Charles she drew herself erect then turned, a smile lighting her features.

'Lili, have I come too late?' she called, observing Andrew at Lili's side, the very picture of a happy bridegroom.

'No. You're just in time. We were about to cut the cake.' She faltered suddenly, averting her gaze in embarrassment. 'Forgive me, but I never thought you'd come ...'

'Say nothing more about it. This is certainly no time to make apologies. Congratulations to you both.' She stretched her arms towards Lili, warming to the pretence. 'My dear, I'm absolutely thrilled for both of you,' she gushed, including Andrew in her smile. 'And if I've inadvertantly caused any shadow to be cast upon this union ...'

'Now 'tis you who must be still,' said Lili, holding her at arm's length. 'All of that has been forgotten, surely. Isn't that the truth my dear?' She turned to Andrew.

'I am sure I've no idea what you're referring to,' he answered, grinning back at her adoringly.

'Well, now that we have laid that nastiness to rest I rather think the time has come to share some good news of our own.' Victoria turned round to Charles, observing with delight his inability to contradict.

'Miss Lili! Charles! So there you are! Forgive my

tardiness.' The voice of Gideon Taylor burst upon them as the little man came hurrying across the grass, preceded by the ever present thick cigar.

'My friend, what is the matter?' Charles responded, noticing the man's distraught expression.

Gideon removed his hat and bowed with tense, erratic movements, glancing worriedly towards the bride. 'It would appear each time we meet I am the bearer of unhappy tidings,' he began.

'What's happened now?' cried Charles. 'Has something gone awry at Taylor Pen?'

'I wish it were that insignificant,' said Gideon, his voice turned solemn and foreboding. 'I just heard the news as I was coming here - there was a terrible uprising in Montego of Free Coloureds earlier today as John LeClerc and Nellie Webster were escorted to the wharf for deportation. Dozens of them, coming out of nowhere, shooting at the soldiers, rioting in protest ...'

'And what came of it?' said Lili, grabbing onto Andrew's arm, her cheeks turned ashen.

'I fear it was a slaughter; soldiers firing into the mob, the pandemonium so fierce it had to end in tragedy.' He paused and hung his head, as though he hardly could endure the telling. 'John LeClerc is dead ... and Nellie Webster ... and the Coloureds who attempted to prevent their deportation.'

'Bobbie Norton!' Lili gasped, her eyes turned suddenly towards Charles.

'The leader of the rebels,' Gideon responded nodding gravely. 'Shot down in his tracks right there beside the quay.' He looked at her, his features suddenly reshaping with surprise. 'How did you know of him, Miss Lili?'

'She and I were friendly with the man,' Charles interjected softly, looking pale and somewhat dazed himself.

'What difference?' said Victoria, annoyed that she had been upstaged. 'Undoubtedly, we have been spared a much more serious rebellion because of the swift and certain intervention of Jamaica's fine militia-men.'

Praise God that we are safe again. And now, I have the most exciting news.' She giggled girlishly and reached for Charles' arm. 'But maybe you should tell it, dearest.'

## 19

The bliss that Lili had intended lasted barely longer than her bridal flowers, falling to decay and crumbling when she realised she was carrying a child. At first she kept the news a secret hoping desperately she was mistaken, but as the weeks went by there was no hiding from the obvious and finally, in trembling tones, she told her husband he would soon become a father.

For Andrew's part it was as though the Lord, Himself, had intervened to bless this union with a sign of His approval. Overjoyed, inspired, he went about the spreading of the Gospel with the energy and zeal of half a dozen men, returning to Bonnaire with hardly time enough to fall into his bed before it seemed that he was up and out again to every corner of the parish, seeking members for the church.

To Lili, Andrew's overwhelming dedication was a double blessing for not only did his work bring satisfaction and fulfilment, but it kept him so entirely occupied that there was little time for him to see the misery and pain she was suffering. Stoic, resolute, she managed through the hours when he was home to hide the terror that she felt, assuring him her waxy pallor and the deep, grey circles underneath her eyes were no more than the normal attributes of her condition and that Doctor Reed had promised that this awful heat made everyone look wretched.

The truth, of course, was that she had not seen the doctor. She dared not lest he be a witness were the baby to

be born a negro. Rather than to take such a risk she'd called upon Mirtilla's knowledge of midwifery and turned for comfort to Aunt Emily, the only one to whom she dared confide that Bobbie Norton could possibly be the child's father, and what she would do if that, in fact, turned out to be the case.

On this particular October morning Lili wakened suddenly. Suffused with sweat, appalled by what she knew was happening, she lay immobilised and listened to him dressing in a corner, moving quietly so he would not disturb her.

'Dearest, did I waken you?' he asked as he approached the bed. 'What is it, Lili?'

'Nothing. Nothing whatsoever,' Lili managed, eager that he leave before the truth became impossible to hide. You must not tarry here on my account. You have a half day's ride ahead of you to Rio Bueno.'

'Are you certain ...'

'Absolutely.' Lili smiled at him with mild reproof. 'You know as well as I that we've another month remaining till the big event.'

He gazed intently at her, hesitant to let the matter rest with this.

'Believe me,' Lili prodded. 'I would know if it were time. Have you no faith in women's instinct? Go now. Do not give me cause to worry.'

'Very well, if you insist.' He moved away then turned back in her direction. 'If this weren't so important, Lili ...'

'Say no more. I beg of you.'

'Twill only be a fortnight at the most. Then I shall not be gone again until the child is born.' He smiled at her and reached to lift the portmanteau in which he'd packed his tracts and bibles. 'Be a good girl and do not exert yourself unduly.' Andrew blew her a kiss then strode into the gallery, footsteps fading, disappearing finally beyond the bottom of the stairs.

Lili clenched her teeth and flung her hands above her, clutching at the headboard. Gasping, writhing as the

second pain rose up to overwhelm her, she attempted to withstand its agony alone, then threw her head back, screaming out Mirtilla's name.

At Allamanda Hall Victoria Rutland sat alone, exhausted from the solitary vigil she had kept throughout the night. At first she had not thought Charles capable of turning to another woman, but as morning came she had no choice but to believe that what he'd threatened he had done.

Of course she'd brought this on herself, she realised - tricking him into a marriage by pretending to be pregnant. It had seemed so simple then, so easy to assume she would conceive before the truth came out. How could she know that months would pass without event till it was clear that she had lied? And who could have predicted that her husband's indignation would be fierce enough to turn him from her altogether, leaving her distraught with need, alone and trembling in her bed?

The sound of caterwauling outside propelled her to a window. Fury turned her eyes to narrow slits of emerald as she spied him staggering across the grass, his arms around the shoulders of two burly looking men she did not recognise but plainly saw to be as drunk as Charles himself. Enraged by this display, she hurried to the stairs, her thoughts awl with things to say the moment that they were alone.

'Victoria! You're just in time to join my friends and me at breakfast!' Charles called out, the stench of rum preceding him across the gallery.

'I should hardly think you able to retain a mouthful.'

'No, ma'am. Charles has had no trouble swallowing all night!' The stranger's answer brought great howls of laughter from the other two.

Revolted by such rowdiness, she stepped in front of Charles and reached to take his arm.

'You come with me now. I am sure that Cambridge will bring something for these ... *gentlemen* to eat.'

'Y'see? The lady cannot bear t'share me with the



company of others,' Charles exclaimed. 'I'll have t'join ya later, lads.'

'You shall do nothing of the sort,' Victoria growled underneath her breath and steered him towards the stairs. He leaned upon her heavily until they'd reached the bedroom.

'I must say Charles that your choice of friends leaves much to be desired,' she snapped as he fell backward on the bed.

'My choice of wives as well.'

'Tis not enough that you've disgraced me? Must you cover me with insults too?'

'My dear, I'd no idea you were so sensitive.' He yawned and reached towards the headboard.

'No you don't.' She scooped the pillow from his grasp. 'Tis shame enough that you have been with heaven only knows what other sort of woman in the night. But to return here in the company of hooligans ...' She ceased her tirade, suddenly perceiving something odd, unlikely in the man's expression. 'Look at me when I am speaking to you!'

Sighing, Charles raised up onto an elbow. 'You're assuming something that is not the case. There was no other woman.'

'Really, Charles, you don't expect me to believe ...'

'I was unable, damn it!' he cried out and smashed his fist into the mattress. 'Much as I desired to, I just could not bring myself ...'

'Oh Charles, that is the most delightful news!' she cried and flung herself onto the bed. 'Can you not see what this reveals? Stop trying to pretend. I am the one you want. No other woman will suffice.'

'As usual, you give yourself far too much credit.'

'Do I?' she replied, reaching to fondle him.

'Victoria! Control yourself!'

'There is no need to carry on so,' she admonished, fumbling with the buttons of his trousers. 'Months have passed since you and I ...'

'You are no better than a common harlot,' he responded, trying to roll free of her.

'And you enjoy it every bit as much as I. Deny it, Charles, and let us see you be convincing,' she continued as his rigid flesh belied the protest.

Charles fell back wearily. 'You know, of course, that I despise you,' he announced.

'I know, my darling,' she replied, her breathing shallow and erratic as she reached to place his hand upon her breast, impervious to what he said or what he thought he felt, as long as he made love to her.

For years it seemed she'd felt their eyes upon her: Emily, Mirtilla, half a dozen old Ashanti women clustered round the bed. Drenched through with perspiration, panting heavily between contractions, Lili turned her face into the pillows, hiding from them, trying not to lose control.

'Twill not be much longer now,' said Emily and pressed a cool, damp cloth to Lili's brow. 'But there's still time, I think, to send for Doctor Reed, if you'll allow it.'

'No!' she cried. 'You mustn't, Emily! You promised!'

'Firs' chil' always hard one,' said Mirtilla, misinterpreting.

A sudden and involuntary tension lifted Lili from the mattress. Crying out, she grabbed the bedpost, broken fingernails scoring wood.

'Is here now!' said Mirtilla, leaning further down. 'Push t'me, gal. Give up dat pickaninny t'you Auntie!'

Gathering herself for this supreme and final effort, Lili willed her child into the world then fell back, groaning, gasping, whimpering against the pillows, waiting for her answer.

Sudden deathly silence seemed to press the life out of her heart. 'Is it a boy or girl?' she whispered.

'Is a boy,' Mirtilla answered, rising into sight. 'A *negga* chil'!' She glared at Lili.

Murmurs of astonishment reverberated through the

humid air and Lili turned to Emily, in need of reassurance.

'Do not think about it now,' the woman whispered, brushing tears from Lili's cheeks. 'The babe is healthy. That is all that matters.'

'Is it?' Lili answered weakly. 'Fortunate that Andrew is not here to see this. I suppose I should be grateful.'

'Yes, but not for that,' said Emily and reached to lift the baby from Mirtilla's arms. 'Here, Lili, someone wants to say hello to you.'

At first she was afraid to look at it, but then the sound of crying drove all other thoughts away. 'No, baby, there's no need to be afraid,' she crooned and placed the child upon her breast. 'Yes, yes, that's right. You're quite a hungry little fellow, aren't you!'

'And beautiful,' said Emily, exuding pleasure as she grinned down at the child.

'Indeed he is,' Lili agreed and settled back to nurse the infant, thankful the ordeal was over with for now, admonishing herself that she must not be swayed by bonds of flesh and blood. Just as soon as she was strong enough, she knew what she must do.

## 20

Heavy clouds obscured the sun and blanketed the world in hazy half light. It was a dense, depressing, fitting background for the melancholy pilgrimage this day would bring. Slumped in a rocking chair before the window, Lili stared at bleak grey mountains swathed in ghostly veils of curling mist. Somehow today they seemed so high, forbidding and inhospitable. A place where one could vanish surely, never to be found. But then again, that might not be the worst thing ...

Gentle tapping on the bedroom door distracted her from brooding. Lili turned her gaze from the window as Emily appeared, a tray of dishes balanced in her arms.

'Mirtilla tells me you've not eaten any breakfast,' Emily announced and clucked her tongue. 'How, may I ask, is "mama" to retain her strength if she refuses nourishment?'

She tried to smile, but could not manage it convincingly. Abandoning the effort, Lili moved instead towards the cradle, reaching down to smooth the coverlet around the sleeping child. 'He seems to be quite satisfied ... despite me,' she responded, choking on the words.

At once the other woman was beside her, staring worriedly, aware of thoughts that Lili had not voiced aloud. 'Is it today?' she whispered.

'Yes, or else I fear that I may lose the heart for it.'

'To which I'd offer my congratulations,' Emily proclaimed, then backed down from her fierce position with a weary, sympathetic sigh. 'Forgive me,' she continued, gently stroking Lili's hair. 'I cannot help but feel that there must be some other way, that children ought to grow up knowing who their parents are.'

'Don't, Emily. I beg of you. 'Tis difficult enough without you saying it. Believe me, I have looked at every aspect of the situation and I see no other choice.'

'And have you thought about poor Andrew?'

'He shall have to find the strength to bear it, just as I shall.'

'Very well, then what about the babe, himself? How will it strike him one day in the future when he learns the truth?'

'At least he'll be alive. What sort of life do you suppose awaits him if I keep him here with me? Can you imagine the injustice, the humiliation he would suffer at the hands of bigots such as Patrick Sloane? Thank heaven he shall be with others of his race who will not castigate him for his blackness. Even savages, as they are called, will treat him more humanely than white Englishmen. I tell you, Emily, I'm doing what is best.'

'If that is your decision and your final word then do as you see fit. What more is there to say?'

Exonerated, Lili reached to take the woman's hand. 'You do not hate me for this, do you?' she inquired timidly.

'Of course not, silly girl. 'Tis only that I worry for you and the child.' Disarmed then by the look of suffering, she moved to gather Lili in her arms. 'At least permit me to ride up into the mountains with you.'

'No. I cannot,' Lili murmured. 'This is one thing I must see to on my own. The journey does not frighten me and Tacooma will be there. But heaven only knows what will occur when I am face to face with Fushabah again!'

A gentle rain was falling as she rode up through the foothills, passing in and out of steamy vales that seemed to separate the Cockpit country from the white man's world below. Dejected, apprehensive, Lili wrapped her shawl a bit more snugly round the child's face, tucked lacy edges underneath his chin and whispered loving, mothers' words, aware that this might be the last time she was able to be close to him like this.

The mountain village seemed deserted, strangely quiet and foreboding as she rode out of the forest. Gathering the child more tightly to her bosom, Lili made her way in the direction of the house where Fushabah resided, bracing herself for the confrontation that she knew to be forthcoming.

'Come, we waitin' on you.' Granny's voice reached out through semi-darkness. As Lili stood dumbfounded in the open doorway she found herself the captive of a dozen pairs of silent, searching eyes.

'Yes, I should have known,' she murmured, stepping in, aware at once that her approach had been observed, reported back to Granny and the elders long before she'd reached the village.

Bony arms reached out to take the infant from its mother. '*Onyame nkrabea nni kwatibea ... The destiny the Supreme Being has assigned to you cannot be*

avoided.' Fushabah glanced up at Lili, black eyes sparkling, clear, triumphant. 'So! De Missy back at las' fe stayin' in Ashanti Town.' Her words were clipped, sardonic, thick with reprobation. 'Foolish gal what's one day marryin' de *buckra*, nex' day layin' wid de coloured man.' The sounds of snickering reverberated through the air as Fushabah displayed the dark skinned babe at arm's length.

'No, I have not come to stay,' said Lili, bristling at the insult. 'I am here to leave the child, nothing more.'

'Den Granny gots no need fe lookin' on dis pickaninny. Him go back wid mumma!'

'Please ... you have to take him!' Lili pleaded as the infant was returned to her. 'I cannot keep him at Bonnaire. You know what's sure to happen if I do.'

'Dat you dere, Juba-Lili!' came Tacooma's startled voice as he stepped through the doorway.

Lili hurried towards him, welcoming the feel of strong, protective arms around her shoulders.

'Lili got she one fine baby,' he observed aloud, attempting to console her.

But she could not answer. Groaning, miserable, she hurried past, out through the door, away from Granny's cold, unfeeling gaze.

'Not run so fas'!' Tacooma called behind her. 'Say me what de trouble be.'

She stopped and leaned against a tulip tree. In trembling tones she told him what had happened, why she'd come into the mountains. 'Granny will not keep the child,' she murmured when her story was complete.

Tacooma nodded thoughtfully, then reached to take her hand. 'You come wid me,' he said, his eyes aglow with sudden inspiration. 'Dere's anudder way, me tinkin'.'

Dazed, confused, she followed after as he led the way along a narrow, muddy path until they'd reached a little cottage high upon a hillside. 'Res' you an' de baby here,' Tacooma said when they had climbed the steps up to a narrow porch. 'Me gots to tell someone you comin'.'

Lili nodded, glancing worriedly behind her, expecting that at any moment others might come running after, hurling insults in *Okomfo's* name. To her relief it was Tacooma's voice she heard some minutes later calling her into the house.

The tiny cottage smelled of cooking. It was friendly, homelike, welcoming and safe. Beneath a thatch of dried banana leaves, black wooden posts gleamed with a high patina, seemingly impervious to red ash from a hardwood fire that covered every other thing in sight.

'Pomelial' Lili said, surprised to find the woman seated in a corner, haggard and staring vacantly.

'How-do Miss Lili,' she replied, a flickering of life appearing in her eyes as they beheld the child.

'Come, bring dat baby here,' Tacooma coaxed. 'Miss Pommie wan' fe hol' de chil', yes?' Smiling tenderly, he touched his fingers to the woman's shoulder.

Hesitantly, Lili did as he requested.

'Sweet, sweet baby boy,' Pomelia crooned and cuddled him against her breast. 'Is no one wan' fe keepin' you?' She kissed his nose and grinned delightedly as he smiled up at her.

'Come now, we say dere in de udder room,' Tacooma whispered, nodding towards a narrow doorway.

Lili followed, glancing back distractedly. 'What's wrong with her? How did she get here?' she inquired the moment that they were alone.

Tacooma's face was tight with anger as he told of the circumstances that had brought Pomelia to Ashanti Town. 'She safe, but never happy, never smilin' till dis day.'

At once she understood where this was leading. Lili stiffened, hesitant to share her thoughts.

'Is good you comin' here an' bring dat baby. Bes' ting what you do,' Tacooma said, perceiving Lili's apprehension. 'Listen now an' trus' dem ting Tacooma say.' He reached for trembling fingers. 'Me knows dat woman, feels dem ting same like Pomelia feel inside. Dat baby gots to have a mumma an' a tata lookin' after. Pommie

an' Tacooma gots no *pickney* what's dere own. Is bes' dis way.'

'Oh do you really think so?' Lili cried, uncertain if she dared believe him. 'Do you think that she is able?'

'Look out dere,' Tacooma whispered, turning her around so she could see into the other room.

Before a window stood Pomelia. She was calm and contented now, the baby nestled in her arms. Soft sounds of singing seemed to soothe the child, to reassure him that at last he'd found a safe and loving place.

'Now what de Missy say?'

At first she could not speak, immobilised by anguish twisting through her innards, battering her mercilessly with the reality of what must be. Exhausted suddenly, she sagged against Tacooma, nodding, choking on her tears. 'Yes . . . take him,' Lili rasped as she turned to flee.

'Not you be stayin' here a while?' Pomelia called.

With all her heart she wished to linger long enough to perhaps find some way to ease the agony of parting from her child. But Lili knew she mustn't, that she'd best be gone before she lost her nerve. 'I cannot stay,' she answered from the doorway. 'But I thank you both for doing this with all my heart.'

With that she turned and raced across the porch, aware the worst was not behind her, knowing she had still to tell her husband that his firstborn son had died.



## PART TWO

## RESOLUTIONS MOVED IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

14 May 1833

That it is the opinion of this Committee that immediate and effectual measures be taken for the entire abolition of slavery throughout the colonies under such provisions for regulating the condition of the negroes as may combine their welfare with the interests of the proprietors.

That it is expedient that all children born after the passing of any Act or who shall be under the age of six years at the time of passing any Act of Parliament for this purpose, be declared free; subject nevertheless to such temporary restrictions as may be deemed necessary for their support and maintenance.

That all persons now slaves be entitled to be registered as apprenticed labourers and to acquire thereby all rights and privileges of freedom; subject to the restrictions of labouring under conditions and for a time to be fixed by Parliament for their present owners.

That, to provide against the risk of loss which proprietors in His Majesty's colonial possessions might sustain by the abolition of slavery, His Majesty be enabled to advance by way of loan to be raised from time to time a sum not exceeding in the whole £15,000,000, to be repaid in such manner and at such a rate of interest as shall be prescribed by Parliament.

That His Majesty be enabled to defray any such expense as he may incur in establishing an efficient stipendiary magistracy in the colonies and in aiding the local legislatures in providing for the religious and moral education of the negro population to be emancipated.

July 3, 1834

Falmouth, Jamaica

My dear Doctor Higgens,

How sweet the mercy of our Heavenly Father! The news abounds of Parliament's decree. It is a full ten years since I first set foot upon Jamaican shores and yet I welcome it with no less energy than were I newly settled in this place.

Of course these tidings do not sit well with Jamaican planters who have recourse to their usual behaviour meant to undermine benevolent intentions of the British Government. They have raised a clamour against the measures proposed and wrought themselves up to a high pitch of excitement. Public meetings have been held and speeches made and resolutions passed. Such is the state of feeling here at present with respect to the extinction of slavery that I am rather frightened for my life to visit the estates. Never have I witnessed such unmitigated fury; where it all will end the Lord alone can say.

The slaves anticipating their emancipation wait most anxiously till King William sends them their free paper. Yet cruelty and oppression still persist. One of the members here was threatened with flogging and imprisonment for not standing in the market all Lord's day to sell her master's goods. I went to the Custos and prevented it, telling him plainly I would send word to the Colonial Office if the woman was punished. No doubt, news of my actions will reach interested ears and heaven only knows what will result.

As you well know this island is barely two years past a terrible uprising. Without saying that they got up the

revolt in order to obtain a pretext and a means of expelling the sectarians from the island, it may safely be affirmed that the planters strove to turn it to this account, and that for this purpose they aggravated its horrors. Their want of success has disappointed them for no missionary has been hanged or shot and with respect to Baptist missionaries, with but one exception, none of us was driven from the island. With many of our chapels ruined, flocks dispersed, their habitations plundered, we remain determined to stand fast with those we love; to share, if necessary, their afflictions.

The planters feel that this will never do. They have formed a society which they call the Colonial Church Union with the two-fold object of defending the guilty parties from such measures as might be directed against them by the home Government and of effecting the final expulsion of the sectarians from the island. To this end public meetings have again been held and speeches made and resolutions adopted - as vehement in their way against the ministers as those against the Government.

In the sentiment expressed by the promoters of the Colonial Church Union it has become manifest that the opposition of the colonists is directed not against dissenters merely, but against the effective instruction of the slaves in any form. Such has wrought an entire change in my mind, and in the minds of some of my fellow labourers in the island, and in our plan of operation. Hitherto, we had done as our instructions from home prescribed, saying nothing publicly regarding slavery and doing all we could to conciliate the planters. But then we found that for the sake of maintaining the system of slavery intact they would violently expel Christianity, we declared hostility against slavery itself, and resolved to identify ourselves with those who have long sought its abolition. We have vowed that we shall never rest until we see this object achieved. And thus, with gratitude and great rejoicing do we hail this latest word from England.

How wonderful to tell my flock that come the first of

*August I shall not preach to them as slaves, but as free men. As for apprenticeship, I cannot give assurances, for often have I seen the law bent sorely out of shape to suit self-serving men of influence upon this island. Still the glory of the second temple must exceed that of the first, for in it no slave will set his foot. As I observe the gladness and delight that greet this news, I must confess that all my trials and every sorrow of this decade notwithstanding, I do love Jamaica and these people tenderly. And if my labours are so blessed to the sons of Guinea as to cause them to go forth to their countrymen with the glad tidings of salvation, then I believe that we are truly entering a wondrous time - a time I think when we shall see that Africa is about to be repaid for all her wrongs.*

*Yours in Christ,  
Andrew Baker*

## 22

### *AUGUST 1, 1834*

Lili rose with dawn's first light. She reached out beside her and found that Andrew had already left the bed. Alert at once, she listened to familiar sounds, the pattern of his movements: clean, precise, unvarying from morn to morn except for certain, subtle differences by which she'd learned to gauge his frame of mind. Today there was no need for that, no cause to wonder if his spirit or his strength were flagging. The occasion, its significance, appeared to rarefy the very air they breathed, to lend a special quality to life itself which could not go unheeded save by those who had no hopes, no dreams, no reverence for the sanctity of humankind.

*'Our Father which art in heaven...'*

He was praying on his knees, the rosy blush of sunrise glowing in his hair, along his cheeks, eradicating years of tribulation carved into his handsome features. Watching this she felt the love expand inside her chest and for the moment she was helpless, captive, overcome by the intensity of her emotion. How she worshipped him, adored him, dedicated all her life to him the way that he belonged to Jesus. It was dangerous she knew, imprudent to relinquish preservation into someone else's keeping, yet she could not have it any other way, for in the giving of herself entirely was the experience of oneness with the man, the only hiding place from memories that haunted her: a touch, a cry, a baby's face with searching eyes exactly like her own.

The prayer completed, Andrew turned and caught her staring. 'Hurry, Lili. Dress yourself. 'Twill never do to have parishioners arrive before their minister.'

'Do not be anxious, dearest. I shall not take long.' She slipped into her wrapper, reached to tuck some pins more deeply into raven hair striated now with glistening strands of silver. Hurrying ahead of him she moved beyond a doorway, through the sitting room and then into her chamber where a steaming tub awaited.

'I have barely slept a wink,' he yawned as Lili disappeared behind an oriental screen. 'Now that the day is come I find myself unable to believe it.'

'You'll believe it soon enough,' she soothed and stepped into her bath. 'Just wait and see my dear, there will be hundreds, thousands possibly, attending the rededication of our church. 'Twill be most gratifying, I am sure.'

'Oh, do you think so, truly?' Pacing footsteps underscored the tension in his voice. 'I worry that the country people might not come for fear of being set upon by those in opposition to their freedom.'

Lili's features tightened as she visualised Ashanti faces hardened with resolve. 'The threats of Godless planters shall not keep the Negroes from us. Not today.' Then, brightening, she added, 'Do they not arrive in

droves each time you ride into the hills to speak? Rest easy, Andrew. God is mindful of your prayers and conscious of the Mission's need.'

'Now that you've mentioned it, I must confess that very need weighs heavily upon my thoughts. Ten thousand pounds. My goodness, Lili. Such a large amount of money. Rather like a miracle that I am seeking.'

'What has happened to your faith?' she chided, sliding further down into the water's warmth. 'The Lord provides as you, yourself, have often said. Besides, we have collected nearly fifteen hundred pounds already.'

'Just enough to raze that horrid schoolhouse, build a new foundation for the church and spread some awnings to protect it from the sun. And most of that from what you've begged and borrowed, to say nothing of the clothes and jewels you've sold.'

'What does it matter?' she replied. 'We need land to build new chapels in the countryside and money to complete the church and school in Falmouth. I'm content. We have enough to eat and clothes to wear.'

'Perhaps I am too vain in thinking I might realise such grandiose intentions.'

'If anything, too self-effacing in the light of all you've done.' She stepped out of the tub, a length of towelling wrapped around her and another in her hand. 'Come, come my darling - dry my back and let us have no more of this depressing talk. The day of victory has arrived. Isn't this what you have worked for, prayed for? Foolish, don't you think, to lessen the reward with needless apprehension?'

Andrew gazed at her, his grin of adoration tinged with guilt as he moved closer. 'Lili dear, how would I possibly endure this life without you? Surely you are everything a man can wish for.'

'Stuff and nonsense,' she replied, her conscience niggling the way it always did when Andrew praised her. Turning towards her dresser, she dismissed him with a flutter of her hand then sagged against the cabinet, entreating God to keep her secret from him always.

They poured out of the mountains and converged along the trails to Falmouth, laughing, crying, childlike in their unrestrained exuberance. From Duncans and from Clark's Town, from as far away as Cousins' Cove and Pear Tree Bottom, hordes of Negroes tramped together, singing of salvation, mindless of the miles they walked to be with their beloved minister. At six o'clock the platform which would one day be the floor of Andrew's church was filled; by ten, inquirers and members overflowed across the hollow halfway up the hill in the direction of the roadway.

Lili moved among the crowd then back to stand where she could see the podium. Swept up into the spirit of the holiday she greeted one and all until her fingers ached from shaking hands. And even then she welcomed others who approached to meet the preacher's wife, rejoicing with them in their new-found freedom, knowing that their presence was not only testimonial to human progress, but acknowledgment of Andrew's efforts and the power of his love.

'Hello there, Mrs Baker. What a wonderful occasion.'

Lili turned to find herself confronted by the bashful smile of Mister Taylor. 'Gideon. How lovely that you've come.' She grasped his hand and squeezed it warmly. 'Surely I had not expected ...'

'Nor had I. But at the last, I had to listen to the voice of conscience. Let Sloane bellow if he must and curse my name before his friends. I would not miss this for the world.'

'And what of *Mrs Taylor*?'

Gideon turned red above the collar of his frock coat. 'Mirabel, I fear, has little heart for such defiance. Actually, I must confess that she has gone to Oxford Hall at Patrick's invitation and intends to make excuses for my absence by pretending I am ill.'

'I see,' said Lili. 'Nonetheless, you must not be too harsh in your opinion of her. Many, I expect, have not



your courage to proceed against the will of Patrick Sloane.'

The man's discomfort seemed to lessen at the compliment. 'Tis only that we are so deeply in his debt or I expect that Mirabel would be amenable to my persuasion. She is terrified that Sloane would turn his influence against us should he learn of our attendance here.'

'Of course. I understand completely. Doubtless there are others who have stayed away for fear of repercussions.'

'Lili, Lili! I have brought him!'

Hearing this she spun around, her smile expanding as she spotted Emily with Uncle Avery in tow. 'You've come at last.' She stretched her arms out towards the couple edging through the crowd.

'And no small doing, I might add,' her uncle said. 'I nearly drove the crew to mutiny, the way I made them press for shore. But it is done, and being here with you and Andrew on this happy day has made it all worthwhile.'

'Oh, you are wonderful. I knew you would not fail.' She flung her arms around his massive shoulders, mindless of the way his thick red beard grazed tender flesh along her cheek. 'Forgive me,' Lili said a moment later, turning her attention back to Gideon. 'I trust that you have met the Captain and his wife. We're old, old friends,' she added, grateful she'd not called him uncle so that Gideon could hear.

'Of course.' He stepped in their direction. 'Mrs Bowles, how nice to see you. Captain ...'

Avery reached to shake his hand then drew back sharply, thrusting something out of sight behind his back.

'What are you keeping from us?' Lili gazed at him suspiciously.

Sharp, craggy features tightened with remorse. 'Forgive me, Lili. I had not intended this for now. We'll

‘speak of it another time.’ Dispirited, evasive, Avery’s jade-green eyes avoided her.

‘Come, come now. Give it here,’ she urged. ‘Whatever can be so important that you have to keep us all in mystery?’

With great reluctance Avery brought a copy of *The Dispatch* into view, its front page framed in black. ‘To some this is a day of mourning,’ he explained as Gideon and Lili gaped at it, appalled.

‘A day of mourning? What is this?’ a merry voice rang out behind them.

‘Charles,’ said Gideon. ‘How curious to find you here.’

‘Indeed?’ Charles answered, grinning wryly. ‘And what of yourself, my friend? Had anybody asked I would have wagered half a crown that you would be at Oxford Hall this day.’

‘Not I,’ the man averred. ‘’Tis Mirabel who’s knuckled down to Sloane. But you, I surely would expect ...’

‘That I would not be witness to this milestone in our history? Absurd.’ He winked at Lili, turned to share a smile with Emily and Avery. ‘Though my wife commands it, I shall not set foot in Oxford Hall.’

‘Not even for the celebration of your daughter’s natal day?’ said Gideon, his voice grown thin with disbelief.

‘’Tis just a pretext,’ Charles declared. ‘Excuse for Sloane to gather his dyspeptic flock about him that they might condole with one another. Misery desiring company, with little Harriot the perfect camouflage.’

‘There’s the truth in that I think,’ the other man agreed. ‘We know who will be gathered there, in the majority.’

‘Indeed we do. The members of that damnable Colonial Church Union. But their blustering will come to naught. Emancipation is the law. There’s nothing more for them to do.’

‘Perhaps, and yet I rather doubt that Sloane will view it that way.’ Gideon frowned darkly. ‘He is sure to think of some ingenious torment to disturb the day’s tranquillity.’

He's not a man to give up easily and watch his slaves become apprenticed labourers.'

'And what is *your* opinion of this new apprenticeship?' said Avery, leaning closer. 'There is talk of little else in England nowadays.'

'Tis not full freedom surely, but an interim condition meant to bridge the gap from bondage to emancipation,' Gideon responded. 'The apprentices shall have to toil three-fourths of every week upon their former masters' land, you know.'

'Another seven years of thankless labour,' Charles announced, 'so that our Negroes can discover how to live and work as free men. Have you ever heard of a more ludicrous idea?'

'Oh come now, Charles, 'tis not all gloom and doom,' said Emily, inclined to view the brighter side. 'They will be given time as well to cultivate their own provision grounds and purchase freedom earlier, if they are able, from the proceeds of their industry.'

'But who's to say they will be dealt with fairly?' Charles complained. 'When have you ever known a coloured man to gain protection from the law? Its premise may be well intended, yet unscrupulous plantation owners will find ways, I'm certain, to slip round the rules and twist these circumstances to their own advantage.'

'Have we not prevented that by sending special magistrates from England?' Avery interjected, speaking now to Charles.

'No disrespect intended, Uncle, but I fear that life at sea has made you something of an innocent with reference to administration of the law. How many magistrates do you suppose - uprooted from their usual surroundings, robbed of customary comforts - will be staunch enough to shun the bribes and other quaint distractions offered them by those in power on this island? Easier I think to champion the cause of justice in the company of men with similar conviction than to stand alone against our local prejudice and pressures.'

The talk continued with no sign of resolution. Weary of it, disinclined towards anything that smacked of pessimism, Lili let her concentration wander off across the clearing towards a group of people gathering for shade beneath the branches of a jack-fruit tree.

At once the breath caught in her throat and an unbearable pulsation hammered at the inside of her skull. Attempting not to panic, barely managing to keep from crying out, she moved mesmerised, in that direction, gasping at Pomelia and the little boy who clutched her hand.

It was the child who saw her first and tugged Pomelia's skirt, demanding her attention. 'Mumma,' Lili heard him say. 'Is *buckra*-lady dere what's lookin' big-eye on we.'

Lili stopped, unable to proceed, and waited for a sign, for some indication from Pomelia that she would not be intruding.

Instant recognition and a moment of surprise. Then smiling eyes bid Lili welcome. 'How-do, Missy. Long time since we been togedder.'

'Yes, I know, I know,' she said, unable to restrain herself from staring at the boy. 'So many times I've meant to visit, to ride up into the hills and say hello ...'

'No need fe sorry. Pommie understan' and tank de Missy kindly fe dem ting she always givin'.'

'What? Oh yes, of course. Please do not mention it. 'Tis nothing, really.'

'Plenty fe dem what go hungry udderwise.' Pomelia stooped to drape an arm around the child's shoulder, cuddling him against a body that had thickened and grown flaccid with the passing years. '*Bayeyere*, dis be lady mumma tol' you sen' dem turkey an' dem salt-meat what you love. Is time fe Daniel show de right politeness.'

Bittersweet ambivalence brought tears into her eyes as Lili sensed the bond of love between the woman and the child. 'You've named him Daniel,' she reflected in a quaking voice. Then, drawing strength to speak more

evenly, 'A fine name for a fine young gentleman, no doubt.'

'What lose him tongue dis day me tinkin', firs' time what him say a *buckra*-lady.' Grinning her encouragement, Pomelia eased him from behind her skirts and over to the other woman.

'Tank you, Missy, fe dem victual an' all dem tasty bird.' He doffed a little cap and peeped up shyly through his long, dark lashes.

Swept up in a rush of longing, Lili gathered Daniel in her arms, her gaze fixed all the while upon Pomelia, saying with her eyes so many things she dared not speak aloud but knew instinctively the other woman understood.

'You'll never want for food; I swear it,' she declared, still looking at her when she finally released the boy. 'If you have need of anything at all, you've only to come to Bonnaire ...' A flash of panic on Pomelia's face stopped Lili in the middle of her sentence.

'Bless you, Missy, but we never leave dem mountain. Is de love fe Jesus an' de open of Him house what bring we down firs' time dis mornin'.'

Lili nodded, shuddering. 'Of course. In actuality you're still accountable to Patrick Sloane.'

'Him slave what pull-foot from de workhouse. An' Tacooma, cause him kill de driver dere, him gots to hide wid me fo'ever. Devil-massa sees we an' him kill we sure.'

The logical extension of that circumstance turned Lili's face a sickly shade of grey. 'The boy as well,' she whispered huskily. 'Appearances would lead one to believe that as your son he, too, belongs to Mister Sloane. Good Lord! No wonder you have stayed in hiding.'

'Lili, dearest. Here you are. We're almost ready to begin.'

The sound of Andrew's voice commanded her attention, made her feel self-conscious, guilty, cornered. 'Andrew, I would like for you to meet ...'

'Pomelia? Certainly 'tis you!' His words and beaming smile conveyed enormous fondness.

'Have you met before?' Confusion wrinkled Lili's forehead.

'More than that; much more. This lady saved my life some years ago, the very night that you and I were introduced, in fact.' He turned back towards Pomelia, reaching for her hands. 'How often have I wondered what became of you, dear lady. I am in your debt beyond my power to repay.'

'Indeed, I think the Lord may now be giving you that opportunity,' said Lili, reeling from the impact of a sudden, overwhelming thought. 'Remember, Andrew, once you spoke of villages - free villages where former slaves could live and work on land belonging to them?'

'Yes, of course. But that was a condition I had visualised for some time in the distant future.'

'Why not now? What better time, today of all days, to begin to set your plan in motion? Pomelia and her people live up in the Cockpit country where the soil is filled with stones, so thin that it is nearly barren. Were we to provide another place for them ...'

'Lili, please. Consider what you're saying. Such an undertaking would require planning, education of the people who would be resettled ...'

'I would visit gladly, every day if need be, to instruct and supervise them.'

'To say nothing of enormous sums of money for the purchasing of land for them. As you well know, the church is crying out for funds to help us meet the cost of projects we've already started. And besides, 'twill be another seven years before the former slaves are fully freed.'

'Unless they buy their freedom first. That, too, is Parliament's decree. When Negroes are possessed of means the law requires manumission.'

Andrew blinked, nonplussed by Lili's zeal. 'My dear, you set my brain spinning. We shall speak of this another time, I promise. Please now, come along. I must begin the ceremony.' Then, acknowledging the other's presence, he turned halfway round and smiled warmly.

'Miss Pomelia, I would be most gratified to number you among the members of our church. Do seek me out this afternoon that we may speak of it?'

Immersed in thinking, Lili barely felt her husband's hand upon her own as Andrew led her towards the platform. Every bit of concentration she possessed was fixed on Daniel and the plan which would enable her, without suspicion, to be near her son. It would be difficult to bring about. Impossible, perhaps. But even so, she knew she had to find a way.

At Oxford Hall another gathering was in progress. Phaetons and sulkies clogged the drive. Upon the lawn a tent had been erected and within a row of tables held elaborate displays of food.

Wafting with the spicy breeze, discreetly assessing other guests, the gentry of Trelawny Parish had assembled at the summons of their awesome and pre-eminent compatriot, the venerable Patrick Sloane. Proud ladies promenaded on the arms of richly tailored gentlemen. Ornately painted fans beat at the sultry air along the balustrades, across the stone piazza, in the entrance-ways and round the gallery where a little throne draped lavishly with rose-pink silk stood ready for the guest of honour.

As for Patrick Sloane, he passed among his sycophants, blinding them with flattery, testing their obeisance every time he pressed up to the youngest and the prettiest to flirt, ignoring husbands who stepped tactfully from earshot. Consequently, no one save the most astute observer would have recognised the actual incentive for that twinkle in his eye.

Yet there were some who knew - an inner circle of associates who viewed him keenly from a distance and, from time to time, slipped through the crowd to whisper, *'Have you heard yet? Is there news?'*

Among these, and the only woman so included, was Victoria. Through fearful eyes she watched her father, loathing his pursuit of women yet admiring, be-

grudgingly, the old man's stamina. No doubt that irrepressible intensity would soon transform to fury aimed in her direction. Patrick Sloane did not take kindly to the lies of others and Victoria had lied.

That he'd allowed her no alternative by pressing his demands incessantly would count for nothing at the time of confrontation. Nothing short of full compliance, absolute submission, was acceptable once he had set his mind upon a thing. But this time he was not to have his way.

Two weeks of threatening and cajoling coupled with the most skilled, exotic methods of seduction she was able to devise had come to naught. Despite her efforts, Charles refused to lend his presence to the day's proceedings or, as usual, to show his face at Oxford Hall. And so, when she and Harriot arrived alone, Victoria had to say that her husband had been detained with business matters and would join them subsequently.

That had been an hour ago at least and now, at any moment, she expected Father would remember, seek her out and worm the truth out of her. Only one thing she could think of might prevent him from exposing her deception, and that was if Billy Austin reached him first.

The cries of children suddenly stamping in towards the house crashed through into her private visions. Apparently the time had come to open gifts, which meant that her participation was required. Cursing the inevitable, she moved in the direction of the steps.

A heavy hand upon her shoulder detained her. 'Am I to endure that man's effrontery again?'

Victoria did not reply but stood transfixed, exhaling slowly, searching in herself for some response to neutralise her father's rage. At last, transcending fear, she turned to him, a calculated, noncommittal smile upon her face.

'Your fingers, please. Remove them from my shoulder. You are hurting me.'

He dropped his hand and grumbled, 'Where in blazes is y'r husband, woman?'



'Buried, I should think, beneath some pile of legal documents. I would not give his actions further thought if I were you. 'Tis Charles' way.'

'As ya remind me every time I summon him t'Oxford Hall. I've offered every opportunity t'make amends, but I am warnin' ya, Victoria, if he persists in this defiance I shall make him wish he'd never seen the light o' day.'

'If that is how you feel why not present yourself at Allamanda Hall and state your ultimatum face to face?' A glint of devilment cavorted in her eyes.

'I won't,' he growled. 'How should it appear fer me, the elder, t'go hat in hand up t'that arrogant, infuriating ... abolitionist.'

Thrilled to have witnessed such a rare display of impotence, Victoria linked an arm through his, in full control again.

'Shall we rejoin our guests then? Everyone is waiting.'

With a gravelly '*Harrumph!*' her father turned and strode into the gallery.

'Children, children. You must cease this arguing immediately!' cried a portly woman from the midst of twenty shouting youngsters elbowing each other for positions closest to a table heaped with presents which, by now, were tumbling to the carpet.

'Quiet!' Patrick roared.

At once, the room was silent.

'Have we not a higher purpose here this afternoon than breakin' one another's bones?' His dour look reduced the lot of them to shamefaced fidgeting. 'Now then, where is me darlin' birthday lass?'

A tiny foot stamped angrily upon the floor. 'Oh Grandpapa, they've ruined *everything*.'

All eyes turned towards the little girl in calico and blue morocco slippers, auburn ringlets tumbling from beneath her mob cap. She was pampered, petulant, the image of Victoria.

'Oh no they haven't,' Patrick scooped the sullen child into his arms. 'Do ya suppose there's anything can spoil the fine surprise that Grandpapa's arranged f'r ya?'

The freckled face was sour, sceptical. 'What is it?' she demanded.

'Now, now. There'll be ample time t'find out later. First, m'little princess, y'must open all the gifts y'r friends have brought and thank them properly.'

'They're not my friends,' she whined and turned her nose up. ''Tis your present that I wish to see, and *now*.'

'Oh Harriot, behave yourself,' Victoria snapped, aware that if she did not intervene at once her father would succumb, and thereby reinforce her daughter's obstinacy. 'Perhaps a spanking is more suitable than presents for a naughty girl.'

The child flung her arms round Patrick's neck and with exaggerated show of anguish burst into tears.

'Now see what y'have done?' snarled Patrick, glowering at Victoria. 'There, there, m'little treasure, do not weep upon y'r natal day. How would ya like t'compromise with Grandpapa? Let's dry those pretty eyes and I shall tell ya what my present is t'be.'

'You will?' the child cooed. 'What, then? What is it you've brought me?'

Patrick hugged her tightly. 'Would ya care t'have a horse t'be y'r very own?'

'A little one? A pony?' Harriot accused disdainfully.

'No, no, a real horse, big as Grandpapa's. Exactly what ya said ya wanted.'

'Show me, show me. I must see him!' cried the girl, and wriggled to be free of his embrace.

'Father, surely you're not serious. A full grown horse?' Victoria began, incensed, amazed that he would be so foolish.

Patrick paid no attention to her. 'But first thing,' he continued, focused still on Harriot, 'y'have t'keep y'r word and open up the other presents. Come along, Y'r Majesty.' He bowed with courtly grace and pointed to the silken chair.

Immediately Harriot complied, the wrath of moments past entirely forgotten in the sweet anticipation of the present.

Seizing her opportunity, Victoria stepped up to Patrick, blocking him before he had the chance to plunge into the midst of birthday offerings.

'I would have a word with you.' Clenched teeth and flashing eyes reminded him that the youngest of the family was by no means singular in her resolve.

'With pleasure, darlin'.' Patrick's tone, intended for the benefit of those nearby, belied the forcefulness with which his fingers closed around her elbow. 'Shall we take a breath of air on the verandah?' Together, they made their way outside.

'Now what is it y'want o' me?' he said with no attempt to mask distraction as he gazed beyond the front verandah, down the drive and towards the iron gates.

'Whatever can you have been thinking when you gave that child a horse?'

'That it would please her.'

'Have you thought about the danger?'

'Hush, Victoria.' He pointed to a figure in the distance, his breathing heavy and agitated. 'Y'r eyesight's better than me own. Can that be Austin ridin' up?'

'Indeed it is!' She felt her own pulse quickening.

'We'd best not tell the others prematurely,' Patrick warned. 'Just take me arm and come along as though we are about t'have a stroll.'

At once, Victoria obeyed her father, walking with him as he moved away from the house.

The stallion churned a cloud of dust into the air as Billy yanked him to a halt.

'Tis worse than we expected,' said the overseer, leaping to the ground. 'There's hundreds of 'em, white an' black, paradin' round the Mission grounds as if the lot of 'em was brothers. And the one what calls 'imself a reverend, right out in the open 'ee is, tellin' everyone how Jesus means fer blackies t'be equal t'the rest of us!'

'Damnation!' Patrick growled. 'I would've wished f'r fewer whites, considerin' what we have planned. Perhaps it might be wise t'wait.'

'I ought t'tell ya,' Billy interjected, smirking at

Victoria. 'Y'r Mister Charles is right there in the thick of it, an' sittin' very cosy next t' Missus Baker. Beg yer pardon, Miss Victoria, but y'r papa pays me f'r the truth.'

'Of course I do.' The older man turned to his daughter. 'Have you known of this . . . relationship, Victoria?'

'Naturally I have not,' she responded, no less furious than he. 'Clearly, Charles has lied, betrayed me every time he's left my sight.' She felt her limbs begin to quake. 'No consequence is too extreme for what he's done.'

'Tis settled then,' her father muttered, fingering the scar that ran from ear to mouth. 'Austin, y'know what t'do.'

'Yessir!' Billy beamed with visions of events to come.

'Allow me half an hour t'pass the word. Then have the horses f'r the others ready out behind the stables. We shall teach the bastards, teach 'em all!' The last was said directly to Victoria.

'Please do,' she murmured, choking on her own desire for vengeance.

'You've m'word upon it,' Patrick promised, grinning with the understanding that they shared.

The church was in full song, a joyful chorus reaching for the heavens. In the first row just below the temporary podium sat Lili, daubing tear-filled eyes that travelled constantly among the people she loved most in all the world. Beside her to the left was Charles her brother; straight ahead upon the pulpit, Andrew; to the right, upon the grass but well within her line of vision, Daniel: flesh and blood, child of her heart, that portion of herself which had been taken from her but returned miraculously on this very day, as though the Lord had chosen the occasion to reward her for these years of work devoted to the glory of His name.

What more dared anyone desire beyond this moment closest in her life to absolute perfection? Could this be a test, a trial? Temptation placed before her that some Greater Power might observe her readiness to rest content or press on, greedily, towards further recom-

pense? Perhaps the wiser course was to be grateful and satisfied. To leave well enough alone. But even as she thought it, Lili glanced again towards her son and knew that she must take her chances.

As the closing strains of *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy* faded to the sounds of bodies settling back into their seats, the Reverend Andrew Baker closed his hymnal, set it down and interlaced long, slender fingers round the binding. 'Friends, dear friends.' The voice that filled the air was thick with fervour, rich with fellowship. 'A day of great rejoicing is upon us ...'

Lili gazed at him, profoundly moved by the passion of his calling. For the first time she looked past the person and appreciated his position and its significance within a greater scheme of things. If only she might reach that place, achieve like harmony of mind and spirit. Then, perhaps, all answers would be evident, all doubts and fears endurable.

So engrossed was she in these reflections, Lili did not hear the whisperings among the audience, remaining oblivious to the disturbance spreading until her husband halted midway in his sermon and began to sniff the breeze.

'*Is burnin' dere!*' a woman near the platform's edge cried out and pointed towards the hill.

At once the congregation twisted round and hundreds craned their necks, exclaiming in alarm.

'Be calm! We must not injure one another!' Andrew's voice boomed out, recapturing attention and preventing riot. 'Everyone stand up, face left and leave the platform that way,' he commanded, pointing in the opposite direction from the source of danger. 'Gentlemen, make haste and fetch whatever buckets can be found. Dear ladies, do not panic. Take your children by the hands and lead them to the sea. Remain with them upon the sand. They must not be permitted to approach the water cannons when they get here. Lord, deliver us!'

Immediately, Lili realised that she'd last seen Daniel on the south side, closest to the fire. She raced across the

platform, leapt down to the grass and gazed in all directions, hungry for the sight of him. Instead, what she beheld were those who must have been beyond the reach of Andrew's voice, careening every which way, witless in their terror. Up above, the flames extended in a line, a barrier that separated this location from the routes that led into the Cockpit country. One had either to run farther east or west to get around the blaze, or through the burning area itself to cross the road and then escape into the mountains. But which way had Pomelia chosen? Gagged, blinded by the smoke, Lili fought her way through the inferno and out onto the other side.

Which way to go? What would a fugitive, on foot, encumbered by a little child, be most inclined to do? The woods, of course! Dense jungle grew up close to the road and ran parallel to it upon the other side.

Green leather slippers urged the horse onto the road. Ribbons rioting behind her, muslin shirrings buffeting her legs, Lili galloped eastward, calling to her son, her eyes devouring the woods for signs of movement. Pausing once to gather breath, she heard a sharp tattoo of hoofbeats round the bend ahead of her. At once she slowed the horse into a trot as intuition warned her to remain behind and out of sight.

'We've roasted 'em like pigs t'day.' A burst of laughter. Coarse expressions of agreement and approval from half a dozen other men. 'F'sure there'll be an extra bit o'coin f'r us from the old man.'

Lili recognised the voice at once. It was the smug, unfeeling tone of Billy Austin. Flame as deadly hot as any she'd just battled through consumed her soul and crackled through her mind. At least Pomelia and the boy were safe she told herself, aware that were it otherwise the overseer would have taken them his prisoners. Yet, even as she felt relief in this, she realised that, but for the grace of God, the lives of countless innocents might have been lost, among them Andrew and her brother, Charles - and all because of Patrick Sloane.

Enraged beyond all hope of temperance, Lili swung

her mount off to the right, along a gully, up a hillock and onto a rarely travelled cow path that she knew - a short cut leading straight to Oxford Hall.

'How dare you!' Lili came upon him sipping claret with his comrades underneath a coco palm.

'A moment, my good woman,' Patrick interrupted, gazing back at her with condescension. 'Is it that y've lost yer wits, or can it be the Reverend's lady has been tipplin' a wee too much Madeira?'

Laughter filled the air.

Recapturing a semblance of control she murmured, 'Mister Sloane, I would appreciate a moment of your time in private.'

'Certainly,' he answered with a wink towards the others. 'That is if y'think I should be safe, alone with ya.'

More laughter.

'Perhaps I'd better come along and see to your protection, Father,' Victoria added, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Exasperated, Lili turned her back upon their sniggering and strode off towards a flower garden walled with privets.

'Now what is it that's got ya frothin' at the mouth?' said Patrick when the trio stood removed from sight.

'You know precisely why I've come,' she rasped. 'What makes you think you have the right to wreak destruction at your whim? Have you no sense of reason, no concern for human life?'

'If I may have a word,' Victoria said sharply, consumed with a fury of her own, 'Before proceeding with fantastical, unfounded accusations, I suggest you contemplate your own behaviour. We are well aware of what is happening 'twixt you and Charles.'

'You jest, of course. Or have you taken to imagining that once again the men you fancy necessarily consort with me? Perhaps, Victoria, 'twould better serve you to determine what it is about yourself that so repels these gentlemen you cannot seem to hold.'

'Harlot! Vile adulteress!' The woman lunged for Lili's eyes.

Her father caught her at the waist, diverting the assault. Its fierce momentum spun them both around with backs to Lili. 'Best that ya withdraw, Victoria, afore this turns t'bloodshed,' he advised, attempting to contain her flailing limbs.

'After what that strumpet said to me? I'll strangle her before I'm done!' She twisted round sufficiently to spit across her father's shoulder, just missing Lili.

'That is quite enough, m'dear. In anger one may say things which, at future times, could turn about to one's own serious disadvantage. Best ya leave the rest o' this t'me.'

His reasoning impressed Victoria, turned her stiffly motionless in his embrace.

'If you insist ...'

'I do.' He loosened his hold a bit to test her calm, then set her free. 'I'll tell ya everything directly afterwards.'

Chin thrust skyward, Victoria stormed off.

'I daresay you've the knack fer rufflin' feathers.' Patrick grinned sardonically. 'But then, 'tis unusual fer anyone besides m'self t'take a stance with that one.'

'I've no interest in Victoria. 'Tis you I've come to deal with.'

'Me? Whatever can y'mean?'

'You know exactly what I mean. There is no victory in brutalising Negroes. No sport in maiming and killing people who've no wish to harm you. Parliament has spoken. Make the best of it and spare us further tragedy.'

'Don't speak t'me of English law. We owe Great Britain nothing. Jamaica is without a representative in Parliament. We are the victims of unjust and indefensible intrusion.'

'Sail for London then, and plead your cause to those you hold responsible!'

'My, my, Miss Lili! Y're a beauty when y'ire's aroused. Perhaps we still might put our differences aside and ...'

'Mister Sloane, you're quite insufferable.' She glared at



him, unable to believe that even now he would not miss an opportunity for conquest. 'Is it possible that slaves and parliament are not the honest objects of your wrath?'

Patrick's eyes flashed wildly. 'Y're a curse upon m'life since first we met. 'Tis not enough ya spurn me offers of affection. Thanks t'you I am an ugly man.' He slapped the scar upon his face. 'A man who has been bested, publicly, by one who turns his back upon his own t'champion the cause of pagans!'

'Calm yourself, Sir. You have twisted things a bit.'

'Tis you brought Mister Rutland t'the notice of m'daughter, causin' her t'turn her back upon a match I had arranged and t'humiliate me once again by marryin' without her father's presence or consent. And now, t'top it all, ya bring disgrace upon this house and jeopardise m'grandchild's happiness by fornicatin' with her father!' Patrick sank against the tree trunk, mopping streams of perspiration from his cheeks.

'Unfortunate, misguided man. You're quite beyond the pale of reason,' Lili murmured, overwhelmed by the enormity of his derangement.

'Do not patronise me,' Patrick snarled. ''Tis you who'll be the sorrier fer what you've done. I shall reduce y'r cursed church t'ruins. Drive that villainous blasphemer y'have taken fer a husband from these shores...'

'You are insane, but you shall never get away with it,' she flung back. 'You may take no heed of me, believe that as a woman I am powerless against you and your band of cut-throats. Yet I shall prevail and keep you from destroying what is good and pure and decent in my life.'

'We'll see, m'lady.' Patrick's eyes were filled with murderous intent. 'Indeed, we soon shall see.'

'... and so, as I've explained, 'tis quite a simple, arithmetical conclusion,' Lili said amidst the clink of goblets and thick, billowing cigar smoke in the library. 'Within a single year, when all the cane's been cut and milled we shall be, all of us, most advantageously remunerated for co-operative endeavour.'

Gideon was first to speak. 'I daresay Mrs Baker, you've proposed a most engaging way to lease your lands to us. Unorthodox no doubt, but not without its touch of genius.'

Murmurs of concurrence came from the other gentlemen who filled the room.

'In times like these one has to be unorthodox,' Lili answered.

'But are you absolutely certain of success?' George Burke, proprietor of Cocoa-Walk inquired.

'How can it be otherwise?' she said, sincerity the product of exhaustive preparation, endless hours of study. 'For the price I've quoted you per share - two pounds the acre - you shall have rich Bonnaire soil producing for your benefit, and with no labourers to pay as I've agreed to see to them for the entire term of our arrangement. Also, please remember I am pledged to underwrite your risk with forfeiture, which I'm empowered to do as outright owner of Bonnaire in the event my plan should not return at least the sum of your investment. At the current price per hogshead and per puncheon we shall clearly reap a profit of eight thousand pounds at minimum, four pounds the acre after your initial funds have been repaid. Half of it for you, the other half for me. Exactly double your advance, although

you very well might realise even more. Which one of you would turn his back on such an opportunity?' She paused for this to take effect while gathering her courage for the final thrust. 'I have two thousand acres at the ready, gentlemen. Would anybody care to be the first ...'

A clap of thunder; voices shouting all at once as every man leaped eagerly onto his feet.

'Aunt Emily, I've done it!' Lili burst into the woman's chamber, dropping a sheaf of promissory notes upon the bed. 'Four thousand pounds! Can you imagine it?'

The woman looked up from the writing desk. 'I'd no doubt that you'd succeed. Not for a moment.' Mischief rippled at the corners of her lips, across the hollowed contours of her cheeks, as satin smooth as Lili's, though two decades lay between the women. 'I have always said I see myself in you.'

A wistful yearning tightened Lili's features as she felt herself reminded that in fact there were no actual ties of blood between them. Charles' mother, Caroline, was Emily's first cousin. It had been John Rutland who fathered Charles and, by a coloured woman - a quadroon - herself as well.

'Come, come now. You and Charles could not be dearer to my heart, were you my very own,' said Emily, perceptive, sensitive as always. 'Must I tell you once again how very much I care for you?'

The affirmation eased Lili's tension. 'Forgive me. 'Tis fatigue that brings such melancholy. But there's no excuse for sadness any longer, is there? We have quite enough to purchase all the necessary land to relocate the population of Ashanti Town. 'Twill not be too much longer now and I shall once again be close to Daniel.'

Emily drew back, her manner guarded, tentative. 'You know I am in full accord with all your aspirations,' she began. 'But don't you think it would be wise to mention this to Andrew?'

Lili shook her head. 'You know how Andrew is. He'd

never let me risk Bonnaire. And surely, I could not explain my reasons.'

'I suppose,' said Emily. 'In any case, Charles must have seen to your protection when he drew the documents.'

'Aunt Emily ...' She paused, her glance averted.

'Lili, no. Don't tell me you've not sought your brother's counsel in this critical transaction?'

'What can come of it?' she answered, shrugging. 'There shall be no cause to forfeit. Our success is virtually assured. As free men owning land, Tacooma and the others can divide their working hours among their own smallholdings and Bonnaire. And, in addition, we've three hundred former slaves who'll be delighted to assist us in exchange for the food and housing I'll provide.'

'Did you say "forfeit"?' Emily turned pale, and drew Lili down with her onto a daybed. 'I should think the time is come for you to tell me *everything* of these arrangements. Details, Lili, *please*.'

As soon as Lili finished, Emily began to pace. 'No doubt about it. You shall have to speak with Charles. My dear, this could be dangerous. Why did you not advise him of these terms? How could you take such grave responsibility upon yourself, alone?'

'Why do you think?'

'Victoria, of course. That horrid creature seems to foul everything she touches.'

'Frankly, I shall never understand my brother's choice. She was a lovely looking girl, but I should think he would have seen beyond the artifice.'

'You mean you do not know?' The woman stopped, leaned closer. 'Charles was under the impression that Victoria was going to have his child. The woman snared him with a lie, to everyone's regret.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Lili, filled with loathing. 'Nothing is beneath that woman, which is why I did not make Charles privy to my plans. Were she to learn of them somehow, no doubt she'd hurry straight to Oxford Hall. I'd rather it be this way, finalised with signatures

and seals before her father can do anything to spoil things.'

'Tis fine to take precautions, but good heavens Lili, had you no alternative than pledging forfeiture?'

'None whatsoever, if I wished to guarantee immediate acceptance. Who'd decline to gamble when there is no risk?'

'But *you* are risking everything ...'

Their talk was interrupted by the sound of footsteps. Glancing round, they saw Mirtilla, breathless, trembling in the doorway.

'What has happened?' Lili quaked, her pulse racing at the sight of terror on the woman's face.

'Is Massa Andrew, bleedin' plenty! Someone do him hurtful.'

Lili flew out of the room. Half mad with fear, she tore along the bannister and raced into the lower gallery. In the middle of the floor sat Andrew, head held in his hands, his handkerchief a makeshift bandage covering his forehead, soaked and dripping blood. 'My dearest! What has happened?' Lili blurted, rushing to him, kneeling close.

'Tis not so bad as it appears,' he answered. 'Just a little bruise. 'Twill mend in no time.' Suddenly he slumped into her arms, the bandage slipping to reveal a vicious gash from scalp to eyebrow.

'Emily, send someone round for Doctor Reed at once!' She turned and saw the other woman in anticipation of this, halfway out the door already. 'Who did such a thing to you?' she whispered as she ripped a length of linen from her underpinnings, folded it to mop the open wound.

'I cannot say in honesty,' he answered. 'Several strangers pounced upon me all at once.'

'Mirtilla, fetch the stable boys to help me lift him,' Lili called towards the woman hovering, her fingers to her mouth, eyes wide and moist with tears.

'No, please. We cannot let the Negroes learn of this and take the risk of stirring them to violence,' Andrew said.

'Not now, when their apprenticeship is just beginning.'

'But I cannot stop the bleeding!' Lili cried.

'Me fix dat fe sure.' Mirtilla squatted down and wound an arm around the Reverend's shoulders. Lili moved aside, aware that *obi* medicine was capable of working miracles.

'Out in de kitchen, dere,' Mirtilla said, 'behin' dem basket fe de bread is bottle, blue an' tiny. Bring me fas'.' As she explained this, knowing fingers sought a special place upon Andrew's temple, pressing it hard. 'Like dis, Miss Lili. See?' Mirtilla smiled and watched the flow become a trickle. 'Go now. Bring me.'

Minutes later Lili had obeyed the woman's order. 'You seem better,' she observed as Andrew sipped the herbal liquid.'

'Naturally. I told you this was nothing,' Andrew answered bravely, though his face retained its waxen pallor.

'I shall pray the soul of Patrick Sloane burns endlessly in hell for this!'

'Lili!' Andrew snapped at her.

Regretting she'd upset him, Lili melted into silence, turned, and hurried off to wash herself. She filled a basin and thrust her arms in elbow deep.

The sight of Andrew's blood diffusing drove her wild with fear and outrage. Lili stared out through a window towards the fields and forests separating her from Oxford Hall. With all her might she wished she were a man and could retaliate in kind, match violence with violence, demolish Patrick Sloane.

But even though she knew that was impossible she realised suddenly there still, indeed, might be another way ...

A visit to the country villages to seek new members for the church provided Lili with a plausible excuse to ride into the mountains. Saddle-bags stuffed full with plover, pigeon and sacks of meal, she climbed the trail, reviewing in her mind how she was going to tell Granny

of the freedom she'd arranged and then prevail upon the woman to invoke her magic to the detriment of Patrick Sloane.

This would not be the first occasion for *Okomfo's* powers to thwart a *buckra*-evil, Lili knew. Since childhood she had been aware of Fushabah's unearthly prowess, for Mirtilla was inordinately proud of *Obeah* justice. Spells and curses, otherworldly alchemy was Granny's stock-in-trade. Had Lili not observed the woman's access to the ears of *Nyankupon* herself? How fitting that the deity of the Ashanti vanquish their most formidable enemy.

No sooner had she come into the old one's presence though, than Lili realised this was not to be a simple matter. Wounded eyes flashed haughtily and ancient, leathery features twisted tight with bitterness and resentment.

'So you fin' you way to Granny aftah ten year gone.' The words were acid, biting, sharp as ever, 'What Juba-Lili wan' from Granny now?'

Lili willed herself above defensiveness and moved closer to the place upon the floor where Fushabah was seated. 'Twas yourself, I know, who made ... arrangements for me to be raised among the Osborns, reared as though I were a child born in England.'

A nod, but still no lessening of coolness.

'And all that, entirely for the purpose of revenge so that I might one day inherit the plantation, turn Bonnaire to the advantage of the people who had worked her soil and suffered at the hands of those who reaped the benefits.'

Sighing, Fushabah looked backward in her mind. 'Dey kill me datter an' she datter ...'

Holding fast, resisting melancholic visions of her mother, Lili spoke again, proceeding logically towards her point. 'You wanted me to help our people. You knew that one day I would have the influence and power of a *buckra*-lady which could then be put to use for the Ashanti. Now that time is come. I've done it, Granny. Thirty-two years later I have finished what you started. I

can make the people of Ashanti Town free men and women now.' With that, she outlined in minute detail the sum and substance of her plan.

'Is one ting you f'gettin',' Fushabah responded. 'Mos' 'portan' is dat people in Ashanti Town hol' tight wid *Nyankupon*. What good fe dem have lan' an' growin' ting if dey be los' f'evah when dey die? Dis life is nothin' but de readyin' fe what come nex'.'

'I see no problem,' Lili blurted, hopeful now. 'Your freedom of religion is assured. On land which is your own you need not be prevented from the private worship of your choosing.'

'Less Ashanti gots nobody showin' dem de ways. *Okomfo* do such all she life. Down dere,' she gestured towards the lowlands, 'is de *buckra* wid him *Nyankupon* name Jesus Chris'. De ways of dat one is what dey be teachin' on we people. Come a time, de Sky God vanish from dis place f'evah.' Fearful eyes stared disapprovingly at Lili.

'Granny, what more can I do?' she sobbed. 'I felt so certain I had thought of everything. Can you not see how this is tearing at my heart? Have you forgotten I am still your flesh and blood?'

'Is Juba-Lili what forget, what turn she back on *Nyankupon*, what say she no *Okomfo*.'

'And just how can I make amends at this late date?'

'Come back. Stay here wid Granny an' Tacooma an' dem udders in Ashanti Town.'

'And leave my husband whom I dearly love?'

'A *buckra*-man. De enemy of *Nyankupon*.'

'No, no. Not Andrew. He is no one's enemy.'

The woman stared, gazed deeply into Lili's eyes and, finding resolution equal to her own, stood up and turned; a signal that the audience was ended. 'Granny nebeh go down dere fe livin' in de *buckra*-lan',' she growled, her voice a quiver. 'Granny done wid Juba-Lili now. Done, finish. Juba-Lili dead!'

A bony arm extended, pointed towards the door, and banished her forever.



'In any case, Tacooma is amenable to your proposal and I gather that in actuality he is their leader. They will follow him, especially to freedom.' Emily removed a length of ribbon from her sewing basket, reaching for matching thread.

'That's true enough,' said Lili, trying hard to concentrate upon the needlepoint across her lap. 'But even so, I would have felt far better, so much more complete if Fushabah had seen things my way.'

'How can you expect her to?' Aunt Emily replied. 'Her life has been committed to one, single purpose. Surely you can understand her fears.'

'I do. And yet, I feel she is a part of me, an elemental part which, I suspect, will never give me rest until I've found the means to make my peace with her.' She sighed, the truth of what she'd said a drain upon her spirit.

Emily glanced up, observed the wan expression. 'What about another part, if I may be so bold as to inquire? How is Daniel?'

Instantly a glow of love replaced the gloom in Lili's eyes. 'He's wonderful,' she whispered, blushing at her own immodesty. 'And quite intelligent, you know? Pomelia's taught him to recite twelve psalms from memory. How many nine year olds are similarly gifted? I can hardly wait till he is near enough so I can teach him how to read and write and see him in attendance at the church school.'

Unexpected boot-heels on the staircase stopped her, turned her towards the gallery.

'Andrew?' Lili thrust the canvas to one side and rushed to greet him as he leaned against the door frame. 'Are you sure you ought to be about so soon? 'Tis only one week yesterday ...'

'You worry far too much about me,' he replied. 'How can a woman of such keen intelligence remain entirely focused on a minor flesh wound?' Reaching out, he made a cradle of his arms for her to cuddle into.

Before another word had passed among them, sounds of hoofbeats galloping along the drive shattered the tranquil morning.

'*Andrew Baker!*' came a gruff, authoritative voice accompanied by heavy footsteps on the front verandah.

'Tis a marshal and his followers, with guns!' cried Emily, across the room by now and peering through the louvres.

There was not sufficient time for either of the others to respond. With great ferocity the band of interlopers burst into the sewing room, their rifles at the ready.

'Are you Andrew Baker?' barked the leader of the group, contempt apparent in the tight set of his lips, the narrowed eyes.

'I am,' said Andrew.

'In that case, y're the one t'be arrested.'

## 24

Lili snapped the reins and drove the horses wildly through the gateposts, hurrying towards Allamanda Hall and Charles, the only refuge she could think of. At the stables, she descended from the coach and raced towards the verandah, calling out his name.

The sight of him emerging from the gallery made her lose all control. Bursting into tears she flung herself against his chest and wound her arms around her brother's rib cage, fighting to regain her voice.

He held her tightly, stroked her hair. 'What is it, Lili? What has happened?'

'They have taken Andrew,' Lili whimpered.

'Who has? Tell me slowly, clearly, everything.'

With all her will she concentrated on the task of organising word and thought. 'You have to help us,' Lili

rasped when she had told it all. 'I've no idea what they will do to him or what they may have done already.'

'Here now, what is this?' The voice, as hard as stone, was shrill with accusation.

'They've arrested Andrew Baker and charged him with sedition,' Charles replied, half turning towards Victoria.

'What has that got to do with us?' she challenged archly. 'Surely it is Andrew Baker's worry, not our own.'

'But I am an attorney, Lili's agent. It is only fitting that she seek my help.'

'Indeed? Is that the reason? I would thank you for a moment of your time indoors, alone.' She spun upon her heel and disappeared into the house.

'And what, if I may ask, is this supposed to mean?' Victoria demanded from the bedroom doorway.

'I am going to Montego. I may stay the night. 'Tis business,' Charles replied, continuing to stuff his shirts into a leather portmanteau. 'They've taken Andrew to the barracks there. I must look in upon him, and secure his freedom if I'm able.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind. 'Tis men like him incite the Negroes to rebellion. I forbid it.'

'I do not remember asking your permission.'

'But I am your wife!'

'The house, the rearing of our daughter is your province, heaven help us. My affairs of business are my own.' He reached into a cabinet, selecting from the neatly folded piles of clothing.

Stymied, spluttering, she glared at him, unable to believe the separation that his words implied. ' 'Tis *she* who put you up to this, that harlot, Lili Osborn.'

'Baker ... *Mrs Andrew Baker*. Or have you forgotten?'

'I? And what about the touching scene I interrupted?'

Charles turned round to face her, a profound exasperation tugging docile features downward. 'We have known each other since we were children. What you saw, or think you saw, was nothing more than the compassion of one human being for another in distress.'

'There's more to it than that. Admit it, Charles.'

'You're wrong, Victoria.'

'The two of you are lovers. If not now, then in the past. At least be man enough to say it.'

'Never. Absolutely.'

'I do not believe you. And I never shall.'

He paused, stared searchingly at her as though to fathom the elusive workings of her mind. At last, relaxing somewhat, Charles stepped forward, offering his hand. 'Victoria, I'm truly sorry that you feel the way you do. If there were anything ...'

'For heaven's sake don't patronise me, Charles,' she snapped, recoiling at his touch. 'I'm certain you are very well aware of what my father's attitude will be when he finds out about this.'

Charles smiled sadly. 'Yes. I should have known he would be uppermost in your concern.'

She exploded. 'Have you given any thought to how it will affect your family to defend the likes of Andrew Baker and his cursed Negro congregation? People will deride me, mock the name of Sloane ...'

'Your name is Rutland.'

'How I curse the day it changed!' she shouted. Then she stopped, aghast, her fingers flying to her mouth, the import of her words transforming fury on her face to guilt, remorse, distress. 'Oh, Charles! I did not mean that. Please, you must believe me. You have got me so upset,' she cried, a tumble suddenly of limbs and petticoats that swept in his direction as she tried to wind her arms around his neck.

'You needn't worry. You've not told me anything I have not known for quite some while.' He closed the leather pouch. 'Good day, Victoria. I trust that by the time I have returned you will have locked the door between our bedrooms.'

Quietly, with even strides, Charles walked into the gallery, leaving her to stare in wonder, stunned, incredulous, as though she'd just been slapped across the face.

August 17, 1834  
Montego Bay

My dear Doctor Higgens,

I have sorry news to impart to you, I fear. On Tuesday, August twelfth, I was arrested in the most brutal manner by a marshal and his followers, hurried to the seaside, and put into an open canoe. After a voyage of many hours I was landed in Montego Bay. The boat being unprotected from the sun my face and neck were most severely burnt and this, as I was suffering a head wound, tended to increase the indisposition under which I laboured. On landing I was marched to the courthouse, (which was made a barrack) where I was placed in the jury box under a guard of four soldiers, militia-men.

Every epithet infuriated malice could invent was heaped upon me. Twice was the bayonet pointed at my breast; and when I requested permission to lie down on the floor, being ill and fatigued, having been harassed since morning, I was damned and blasted, told that if I moved I should be instantly shot. No fault had I committed but I was a missionary, and that was enough. Yet was I calm and thankful that I felt a disposition to pray for my enemies, who were taunting me that I should be shot on the morrow and pleasing themselves with the sport.

At this juncture when all seemed against me, God raised up a friend in Charles Rutland who, after much trouble and fatigue, succeeded in delivering me from my foes and procured for me a bed aboard the *Sea Wind*, anchored in Close Harbour, captained by his uncle, Avery Bowles. At twelve that night I finally had the pleasure of devotion, unmolested, thanking God for His great kindness in not letting me be murdered, and laid my weary limbs to rest.

On Wednesday morning the same kind friend, Charles Rutland procured my liberation on bail. My dear wife had arrived with him, and once again we joined in grateful thanks to God. That same day I was attacked

*with fever brought on by fatigue, exposure and anxiety. God mercifully restored me and enabled me to cast my cares upon Him, trusting in His mercy as I wait the time until my trial ...*

## 25

No sooner was a verdict of acquittal rendered than Victoria arose to leave the building. Redfaced, furious, she elbowed through the noisy throng, eyes moist behind her veil, desiring to flee before she could be recognised.

No chance of that. Like tributaries to a river, streams of people flowed into the aisle, blocking her escape so that when, finally, the tide of bodies swept her out into the daylight she came face to face with half a dozen women she had purposely excluded from her invitation to take tea with her.

'Victoria, my dear,' chirped Mrs Whitelocke, the vibrato in her voice enough to make Victoria's blood run cold. 'How absolutely dreadful for your father.'

'Yes, indeed,' Miss Abernethy added, eyes ablaze with malevolence. 'Smallholders such as we are sure to suffer, but 'tis nothing when compared with the changing fortunes of the large proprietors.'

'Of course, but even worse for poor Victoria,' a third insisted. 'I am sure I do not know how I would bear it if my husband were a publicly avowed *humanitarian*.' She snickered at the term. 'The shame and the humiliation of it all. My word, how do you tolerate the strain?'

Victoria felt every pair of eyes upon her, heard disdainful voices whispering her name. 'I do not have to tolerate it,' she proclaimed, the words flown past her lips without consideration, loud enough for everyone to hear. 'Charles Rutland is no longer my concern. I've left

him and returned to Oxford Hall.' With that, she thrust her chin ahead of her and strode off airily, as though impervious to anyone's opinion, yet, within herself, resolved to suit the action to the word.

By the time her sulky reached the gates of Allamanda Hall, Victoria was beside herself with rage. How dare Charles Rutland spoil her life, and for Lili's sake? She slammed the carriage door and strode into the gallery, calling out for Juliett's immediate attendance. Blind to eyes that peered from doorways, over window casements, she proceeded to the study where she knew Charles kept a flask of brandy for his clients.

Wincing at the bitter taste, she gulped down the potent liquid, needing it to calm her as a never ending list of details pressed for her consideration: things which must be packed immediately, nonessentials she could send for afterwards. But uppermost and hardest to endure were visions of what lay ahead: a monastic, celibate existence beneath her father's baleful eye.

'And where the devil have you been?' she snapped as shuffling footsteps carried Juliett into the room.

'Me sorry, Missy, but dis *pickney* gettin' heavy now fe runnin'.' Sheepishly the maid glanced at her swollen belly, stroked it tenderly as though to reassure the child expected three months hence. 'De massa say fe Juliett take time an' res' herself till baby come.'

'What Mister Rutland says is of no consequence,' Victoria responded, shaken by the very mention of his name. 'No longer shall he be your master. We are going back to Oxford Hall. Today.'

'Fe always?' Juliett's voice had faded to a shadow of itself. 'You partin' from de Massa?'

'Absolutely, and I shall be better off for it,' Victoria continued, yearning to believe the words. 'At least with Father watching over I shall not be subject to the ridicule of stupid people with no understanding of the chaos to befall Jamaica in the wake of recent and insufferable events. Perhaps I'll take a holiday and journey home ...

or to the continent ...' Her voice trailed off, distraction and, at last, the power of the brandy numbing, softening.

'Beg pardon, Missy. Juliett be sorry, but she not go back fe live in Oxford Hall.'

The maid's resistance snapped Victoria from her reverie. 'Ridiculous. You'll do exactly as I say. Have you forgotten who your mistress is?'

'No gots a mistress,' Juliett replied. 'Me gots a Massa - Mistah Charles, what buys me 'way from Oxford Hall when Missy marry him.'

'For me,' Victoria responded. 'As a wedding present to assure continued services. You shall remain my property until such time as I decide to let you buy your freedom.'

'No, Miss. Is de new law, come from Englan', say me only gots t'serve de *buckra* some de time. De res' belong to Juliett.'

'Oh does it now?' Victoria rasped, her breathing shallow and more rapid as her outrage rose out of control. She spied a riding crop that Charles had left upon a chair and reached for it, a vicious smile upon her face. 'And has your new acquaintanceship with jurisprudence taught you what will happen if you dare to disobey me?'

'Missy, *no!*'

The housemaid saw it coming, but too late. Victoria fell upon her, savage, unrelenting, grunting as she flailed the woman to her knees.

'De baby ... *please*,' the housemaid screamed and rolled into a ball, her body curled in the same position as her unborn child.

'Damn ... you ... and ... your ... bastard ... babel!' Victoria railed on, each word accompanied by one more violent, downward motion of the whip. 'Will you obey me now? Are you quite ready to prepare my trunks and gather Harriot's belongings?'

'Yes, me do so. Anyting de Missy say me.'

'That is better!' Satisfied at last, Victoria tossed the crop aside and sank into a wing chair. 'Tell the stable boys to have the coach-and-four brought round. We shall



be leaving in an hour. Not a minute later, do you understand?’

‘Me hear dat,’ Juliett whispered, struggling to her feet and through the doorway, whimpering from painful cuts that striped her swollen flesh from breast to knee.

As the coach rolled towards the wide, white mansion on the hill, Victoria leaned forward, nervously observing Patrick’s carriage near the stables. For the first time it occurred to her that he might not permit her to return. That in the heat of his disgrace the man might number her among his enemies because she bore the cursed name of Rutland. Braced against that possibility, Victoria instructed that her luggage be brought round the back and she started up the stairs.

A tense, forbidding silence in the house bespoke her father’s mood. A crash of metal at the far end of the hall, the sound of breaking things and gruff obscenities informed her where she’d find him. Drawing strength for battle she moved rapidly in that direction, chin high, shoulders squared.

She paused before the entrance to the library, intimidated by the disarray before her. With a single, angry swoop her father’s arm had swept the desk-top clean. Books, papers, statuettes, lay strewn across the floor. Before the open window stood Patrick Sloane.

‘I thought you might be taking this to heart,’ she said, as she stepped in and kneeled to lift a china figurine that lay upon the carpet.

‘You have heard then,’ Patrick grumbled, turning to her, pale, shaken.

‘I was there,’ she murmured. ‘’Twas my shame as much as yours.’

‘Oh, was it now?’ he snarled. ‘And when did ya become the lovin’ daughter, Mrs Rutland? I should think y’d be rejoicin’ at y’re husband’s victory. If you have come t’mock me, woman, I am warnin’ ya ...’

‘I’ve left my husband and returned to Oxford Hall.’

‘Another prank? A scheme o’yours t’wound me f’r

some wrong that you imagine I have done ya ...'

'You have only to step out onto the rear verandah and observe my baggage if you don't believe it. Harriot is at the dancing teacher's house, but will be following directly. This is not a joking matter, Father.'

Patrick crossed his arms and glared at her suspiciously.

'You don't suppose I would remain with someone who has turned himself into a public spectacle,' she challenged, irritated by that condescending look she knew so well. 'Because of Charles I am the laughing-stock of Falmouth. Everyone must know that he has taken up with Lili Baker while his wife, your daughter, has been forced to bear the shame of it in silence.'

'So, 'tis Lili at the heart of this again. I should have known. Ironical, isn't it, that she who brought the two of you together should be instrumental in the ruin of your marriage?'

'Worse than that. She'll profit from the trial every bit as much as Andrew. There was quite a bit of money riding on the verdict, you must know.'

'She is his wife. Of course ...'

'No, more than that. The future of Bonnaire hung in the balance. I am sure the men with whom she does her business have been eagerly awaiting the results.'

'What do y'mean?' A burst of curiosity rejuvenated Patrick.

'Are you not aware that Lili's put out shares on lease to other planters?'

'You are certain of this?'

'Absolutely. Lili said as much to Charles within my hearing. I am also certain that if the crops do not come in the woman will be ruined.'

'Darlin' daughter, we shall see t'that!' He clapped his hands together, trembling with enthusiasm. 'Hurry now. Unpack y'r things. Y'cannot know how glad I am t'have ya back.'

With that her father turned and thrust his head out through the open window, bellowing for Billy Austin.

*Green Gully . . .*

The name itself brought gladness to Pomelia's heart. From her vantage point high on a hillside she gazed lovingly upon the village. Tiny wooden cottages nestled beneath the limbs of trees beside a river. The new cane, already knee high, rippled in the glow of sunset. Certainly this was the perfect place to live her years out with Tacooma and to raise their boy. Midway between the Cockpit country and the coastal lands where *buckras* lived, this valley seemed particularly blessed with fertile soil and natural protection from the winds of stormy seasons. God spare Missy Lili and the minister who bought the land and gave it to the people of Ashanti Town. A gift of freedom and a refuge where New Christians could be close to Jesus.

Pomelia turned back toward the building she'd remained behind to paint. A fitting place, she thought, to put God's house. In sunshine. On the highest point of land within the boundaries of the village. One more wall to cover with a second coat of white and the Green Gully was complete.

She reached down for her painting can and noticed movement round a bend of road below. Alarmed, Pomelia hurried in among a clump of soursop and peered out from the camouflage, trying not to panic. Whom could she have seen? Not any of the children, she was certain. This was *Couba*, Wednesday, and they'd gone directly from the schoolhouse in the afternoon to help their parents work the Bonnaire fields. And certainly no *buckra* would attempt a journey up into the hills on foot. A bit less frightened now, she stuck her head

out in the open, craned her neck to look again down to the trail below.

'Miss Juliett!'

Pomelia flew out of the thicket, racing down the incline towards the woman who had turned when she heard her name called, teetering suddenly and falling to the ground. In moments Pomelia was on her knees beside her, cradling the woman's head and shoulders, wiping streams of perspiration caked with road dust from her clammy cheeks.

'What you be doin' here? Why you be walkin' in dese hill so soon before you time?' Pomelia's eyes glanced fearfully at the enormous belly heaving up and down in tempo with the woman's heavy breathing.

Juliett clutched Pomelia's arm, her fingers trembling with urgency. 'Me come to tell a ting, fe warn 'bout how me hear dem *buckras* sayin'.'

Narrowed eyes blinked with confusion as Pomelia felt herself divided by the need to take her friend to shelter and to understand the message. 'Come,' she said, deciding. 'Pommie help you walk dere in she house.'

The woman opened up her mouth to speak, but suddenly her eyes rolled wildly in their sockets and what would have been her answer turned into an anguished cry for help. Again the fingers clutched as violent spasms took possession of her body.

Instantly, Pomelia understood. 'How long dem pain been comin'?'

'Since me halfway here dis mornin'.' Juliett was panting, shivering with fear. 'Miss Pommie!' she cried out, her back arched high up off the ground. 'Is comin' soon!'

'Hush,' the older woman whispered. 'Pommie here wid you. She know a ting 'bout bringin' baby in de worl'.' Her eyes searched out a little hollow not too far away, its bottom blanketed with thick, soft fern.

'But firs' me gots to say you . . . ' Juliett groaned weakly.

'No. Is time fe dis now,' said Pomelia, waiting for a respite in between contractions so it would be possible to

move the woman. 'When is over den you say me everyting.'

Shortly after, in a little grove of mountain pride beside the road, a child was born. The first to draw breath in the village of Green Gully. They named her Sybil, in the memory of Juliett's mother.

Silhouettes on horseback, they rode south by southwest, shadows beneath a quarter moon that cast a cold and eerie light. Single file, they took the long way round through Gun Hill, moving carefully down narrow trails and over rocky slopes so steep the horses wheezed and tossed their manes in terror as their hooves slid frantically for footing and loose rocks bounced giddily towards unseen resting places.

At George's Valley they turned north towards Salt Marsh Cay, gave wide berth to the mansions standing sentinel above the fields, and made their passage, undetected, through the miles of cane that stood to their plan, each of the six familiar with the area, aware of what he had to do.

Before the moon dipped towards the sea another light arose on the horizon, brighter, more compelling than the crescent in the sky: the luminosity of blazing canefields.

Patrick Sloane was whistling as he drove his carriage through the gates of Taylor's Penn. The farm seemed particularly tranquil on this pleasant morning, bathed in sunshine, sweetened by the waft of new mown hay and the bleat of baby lambs. Descending, he approached the house with jaunty steps, hopped to the porch and knocked.

A hurrying of slippers feet inside, the front door opening, and Mirabel stood in the doorway, chestnut curls askew, her eyes like amber moons grown wide as they observed who'd come to call. 'Forgive me, Mister Sloane. I'd no idea you were expected.' She stepped backward slightly, clutched the bodice of her wrapper.

'Gideon's been back an hour barely, trying desperately to get some sleep. The fire, you know. It kept us up the night. A dreadful thing, Bonnaire in flames.'

'What can we hope for when we give the blacks their liberty? Of course, 'tis dreadful.' Patrick shook his head and fixed a proper look of gravity upon his face. 'But still I am obliged t'speak with Gideon. Some business matters cannot wait. I hope y' understand.' He flashed his most engaging smile.

'I do, I do,' she twittered, fussing with the disarray of hair upon her forehead. 'Make yourself at home, Sir, in the shade. I shall fetch him. Then I'll put the kettle on.'

'I thank you, Mirabel. That's very generous.' He stifled his desire to laugh as she ran frantically into the house.

Minutes later, Gideon stepped out onto the porch, half dressed, his salt and pepper coloured hair still flattened from the pillow.

'Ah, my good sir, I must say y'look a mite undone this mornin'.' Patrick scowled at deep grey shadows under bloodshot eyes, a jaundiced pallor. 'Have ya not recovered fully from y'r recent fever?'

Gideon glanced left and right, avoiding confrontation. 'I've been through a gruelling night. I'm sure you must have heard what's happened.'

'Certainly I have, an' I am sorry f'r Miss Lili an' the others at Bonnaire. But that is not what I have come t'speak about.'

Gideon transferred his weight from one foot to the other, nervous, apprehensive. 'You have come about the money owed you, I suppose.'

'This is November first.' A grin, angelic and innocent, appeared on Patrick's face. 'The sum is due t'day.'

'I know it, Sir. But I shall need a bit more time.'

'More time? Am I t'wait indefinitely?'

'This is not as I'd intended. You've my word. I've never failed to pay my notes as they came due in all the years that we've done business.' Gideon moved closer, breathing heavily. 'I fully meant to have your money for

you, but the fire last night - it's set me back enormously.' 'And what have ya t'do with that? 'Twas Bonnaire burnin', not y'r own land.'

'Might as well have been my own land,' Gideon responded, shamefaced, miserable. 'The fields that burned, two hundred acres of them, were on lease to me.'

'Two hundred acres?' Patrick whistled at the mathematics of it. 'An unfortunate reversal, surely, but I trust that y'can raise the money still. You've friends about who'll lend ya what ya need t'tide ya over, yes?'

'No use in asking. I am not alone in this catastrophe. There's Burke and Pye and Rainsford ... many of us, in together. The investment seemed so safe, so sure ...'

'A pity. Now y're left with nothin?'

'Only worthless notes.'

'Oh, hardly worthless, I should think. The land retains its value.'

'No, Sir. That would mean foreclosure. We could never force such hardship on Miss Lili and the Reverend.'

'But the notes she gave you - were they not intended to insure against just such contingencies as this?'

'A mere formality to show good faith. The lady suffers more than any of us, I am sure. We could not press her into ruin.'

'But ya would destroy y'rselves. Is that what you are tellin' me?'

'Things will be sticky for a while. But the others have their stores, plantations. I have Taylor's Penn.'

'You also have y'r debt t'me.'

'But surely, in consideration of the circumstances you'll extend yourself a bit ...?'

'Of course I'd like to, and I truly wish I could, but, Mister Taylor, I've me obligations too. With slaves demandin' wages I cannot afford m'debtors t'be late. I'm sorry, but I must insist on all of it. At once.'

Panic drained the life from Gideon's face. 'But what can you expect of me? I've told you that I cannot meet the terms, explained the reasons why. Unless I were to forfeit Taylor's Penn there's no way possible to satisfy my

obligation. Everything I'd saved is gone. There's nothing. Truly.'

'I would not say ... nothin',' Patrick contradicted, gazing skyward.

'Household furniture? A dozen slaves? What can the lot be worth compared with what I owe?'

'That's not what I was speakin' of. Ya have that interest in Bonnaire.'

'The crops are gone. I told you; it is worthless.'

'Not t'me. What did they cost ya, Gideon?'

'Four hundred pounds.'

'That much? I'll give ya back two hundred.'

'That is merely half! The land alone is worth ...'

'T'whom? Are ya prepared t'sell it elsewhere? Can ya think of anyone with ready cash?'

'Well, no ... I cannot. Even so ...'

'Tell y'what,' Patrick moved to place a hand on Gideon's shoulder, 'seein' how we've known each other such a long time, I shall make a private bargain with ya. Go an' seek y'r friends. Convince the others they'd do best t'sell their notes t'me - a pound the acre. If ya do, and are successful, I shall give ya triple what y'paid f'r yours and call the debt between us even.'

'I appreciate the offer, truly, Mister Sloane. But if I may speak candidly, 'tis well known there's been animosity between yourself and Lili Baker for some time. For me to help you buy those notes, Sir, I would need assurance as a gentleman they'd not be used to press the lady to default.'

'Twelve hundred pounds in y'r own pocket,' Patrick said again as though he had not heard the other's stipulation.

It seemed Gideon had stopped his breathing. 'You drown me with temptation, Sir, but I must say this is a hellish place you've put me in.'

'Perhaps. But 'tis y'r choice entirely. Y'can decide t'lose this lovely home or come away with gold t'spare. Enough, man! What is it t'be? I've not the time t'wait f'yer decision.'



Gideon's integrity expired with a long and weary sigh. 'Tis clear there is no choice. Very well, Sir, you shall have your way in this. I'll find the others and report to you by the morrow.'

'A very wise decision,' Patrick answered smiling and satisfied. He sauntered to his carriage, whistling his favourite tune.

## 27

She'd come too late.

Standing on a precipice above the coastal plain, Pomelia gazed out over blackened fields where thick grey tendrils rose to obfuscate the sun. Even at this distance she could smell the stench of conflagration, feel it thickening her lungs and stinging in her eyes, but it was not the smoke alone she knew that brought these tears to cloud her vision. It was fear for Reverend Baker, for Miss Lili ... for herself.

Swallowing against the tension closing up her throat, Pomelia turned back towards the road, determined to complete this journey, not to let the panic overwhelm her, force retreat. Yet even as she vowed to be courageous there was no forgetting what she knew, no running from the images that plagued her. After all these years the very thought of Patrick Sloane could knot her innards, weaken her with horror. He was Lucifer incarnate, the embodiment of evil on the earth. That God could let him live, permit him to harass such saintly souls as Reverend Baker and Miss Lili was a mystery she could not understand. Yet from that very ignorance, Pomelia knew, arose whatever strength she'd drawn to go on living through adversity, for terrible though her fear of Patrick Sloane, her faith in God was stronger. In His own good

time He would reveal His plan she trusted, clarify the reasons for all suffering. Until then, as the blessed preacher often said, she must abide with Him and wait for her eternal peace.

The lowland forests were familiar to her from the many times she'd run their paths between Bonnaire and Oxford Hall. Thoughts flying on ahead, Pomelia dashed through shady caverns, footsteps covered by the rustling of leaves, the screech of birds. Her body longed for rest, but there could be no stopping, not till she was certain that the preacher and the mother of the child she loved were safe.

Her tears flowed freely as she burst out of the woodland and observed the stately mansion standing tall and proud. Praise God! The fire had not consumed the house, she reflected. Suddenly she stopped and threw herself upon the ground, the heart exploding in her chest, for there, not twenty yards ahead of her was Patrick Sloane, emerging from his carriage, whistling in that certain way that set the ones who knew him well running for their lives.

Lili tiptoed from the bedroom, lips still warmed by Andrew's cheek where she had kissed him as he slept. Poor darling; he appeared so frail, so helpless in that bed. The weeks of strain, the tension of the trial had left their mark, reducing him to little more than flesh and bone. And now the fire. She shuddered at the thought of smallpox, yellow fever, easily a dozen other ailments commonplace in tropical regions. She must watch him carefully till he grew stronger. For the present, it would seem God's will was that she deal with what had happened by herself.

The stamp of boot-heels in the lower gallery and the harsh, bombastic voice of Patrick Sloane seemed, at the first, to be hallucination born of tension and fatigue. Lili grasped the railing, closed her eyes and tried to will the sound away. But the truth was irrefutable. Indeed, the man was here.

'Get out at once!'

Her voice, a throaty growl, spun Patrick from his admiration of a lacquered, oriental screen.

'Miss Lili, I'm so sorry t'disturb ya ...'

'Do not bother to remove your hat.' She stopped him in mid-motion. 'I shall not mince words. I want you out and gone this instant! There is nothing to be said between us, Patrick Sloane.'

His grin, laconic, self-assured, was reinforced by glistening eyes. 'I would not be so quick t'take that tone,' he warned. 'I daresay we've unfinished business.'

Lili paused, perplexed, suspicious, wishing she could penetrate that smug exterior and second guess the convoluted mind beneath.

'The jury has concluded everything quite satisfactorily. Now if you will kindly leave ...'

'Dear lady, y're distraught no doubt, what with that awful fire an' y'r loss o'crops. But as you'll see, I'm not a vengeful man. I'm quite disposed t'lettin' bygones be.'

'In heaven's name, what do you want of me?' she rasped. 'What further business could we have?'

'Not here, m'lady. I'll not speak of monetary matters where m'words can easily be overheard. The library would be more suitable I think.'

'There are no secrets in this house. If there is something you would say let's have it out and done with, here and now.'

'No secrets, eh?' he challenged. 'Does that mean y'r husband is apprised of *all* the details of y'r dealin's with the likes o'Gideon an' Rainsford ...?'

'What has that to do with you?'

'A great deal. Now, if y'would care t'take a civil tongue we can proceed.' He turned and strutted down the hallway to the study.

Lili followed. Dry mouthed and pale, she crossed the threshold, wondering how much her enemy had managed to unearth.

'Out with it now,' she ordered when the door was closed behind them.

Lengthening the torment, Patrick crossed the room to lean against the desk. 'Quite comfortable,' he murmured, fondling a bronze and crystal ink stand. 'Doubtless I shall be content to live here.'

'You are talking nonsense,' Lili spat. 'Where is this leading? Do not speak in riddles.'

'There are certain instruments of mortgage,' Patrick said, 'which have come recently to my possession. Full four thousand pounds, if memory serves. From Gideon and Rainsford, as I've said. From Pye. From Burke. Indeed, a most extraordinary acquisition. 'Twould appear, Miss Lili, you have fallen deeply in m'debt.'

She felt her brain go numb, the energy abandon her limbs.

'You are distressed,' the man continued, grinning shamelessly. 'By that I must assume y're not in a position to reclaim them.'

'You know very well I'm not. Why do you even ask? Have you no heart, no human feeling?'

'Come along now, do not be so quick t'think the worst o'me,' he answered. 'I've not come here t'torment ya; rather t'arrange a compromise. Don't y'suppose that I appreciate how painful it must be f'r ya t'think of relocatin' after livin' at Bonnaire so many years - the very house that once belonged t'Grandmama? If fer no other reason but that I was once acquainted with the lady, I'm prepared t'offer an alternative.'

'And what had you in mind?'

He sauntered towards her. 'There are many ways o'payin' debts. No doubt y'recollect an evenin' when it seemed the two of us might reach an understandin' of a most particular and satisfyin' nature?'

'That was years ago. I am a married woman now. Have you forgotten that?'

'Not f'r a moment,' Patrick growled. 'Yet I'll be glad t'do me best.'

'How dare you!' Lili backed away, repulsed. 'Is there no limit to your wickedness? Do you suppose I'd even entertain such vile notions?'

'Entertain y'll, consent y'must - unless y've access t'four thousand pounds within a fortnight.' Patrick's hands reached out, thick fingers closed around her trembling shoulders.

'Leave this house at once,' she ordered. 'If you do not, I shall scream for Andrew.'

'What will that accomplish?' Patrick chuckled. 'D'ya think that pitfiul excuse f'r manhood who deserts a pretty wife t'spend his time with niggers can oppose the will o' Patrick Sloane indefinitely? Stop this, Lili. I can recognise a lusty woman when I see 'er. We shall find a way whereby no one is the wiser. Let us have a truce - an understandin' - so there need be no unpleasantness between us.' Patrick pulled her to him, pressed his mouth upon her own.

Before she'd realised what she'd done her fingers closed around a letter opener upon the desk-top. Twisting round, she struck out blindly, slashing through a sleeve, sharp metal raking flesh along his shoulder.

Patrick yelped in pain and jumped away. The fingers of his right hand sought the wound.

'Get out!' She ran to swing the door wide open. 'Leave before I kill you!'

Patrick's eyes grew wide at the sight of blood upon his fingers. 'Very well then, have it your way,' he replied and started for the exit. Reaching it, he dug into his pocket and produced a sheaf of papers, waved them wildly in her sight. 'A fortnight, d'ya hear? Then, if that sanctimonious reformer an' y'rself have not departed, bag an' baggage, I shall be here with a constable t'drive ya out!'

Pomelia waited for the sound of carriage wheels to fade before she crept from hiding in the candlebush beside the open window. Glancing left and right she rose and peeped into the library. 'Psst - Miss Lili - safe fe Pommie come in dere now?'

Lili jumped out of the chair where she'd been staring, glassy eyed. 'Pomelia? What on earth ...' She beckoned

to the woman, turned and moved to close the door, insuring privacy.

By then Pomelia had already climbed inside and hurried halfway through the room. Their eyes met and at once her heart went out to Lili. 'Not be frighten'. Massa Patrick gone now.'

'Then you heard it all?'

Pomelia nodded. Helplessly she watched as Lili sank into a chair, convulsed with sobbing. 'Missy, please ...' she murmured feebly, at a loss for words.

'Pomelia, what am I to do? That man is going to destroy us - take Bonnaire away.'

Profound compassion moved Pomelia past accustomed barriers. She knelt and took the woman in her arms. 'Me come fe say you sometin' - beg de Missy go see Massa Charles fe help a slave call Juliett. Is better, maybe, Missy do dat now fe help herself?'

'Of course. How stupid of me not to think of it.' She hugged Pomelia back. Then Lili froze, remembering. 'Victoria ... I cannot risk her being witness to that conversation.'

'Dat one not be livin' dere no more. Is some of what me come fe say you.'

'Tell me about it in the carriage.' Revived somewhat, encouraged by this news, Lili took Pomelia by the hand and led her from the room.

Above the cadence of the hoofbeats, Lili heard Pomelia say that Charles' wife had gone back to her father. Yet beyond that she'd no strength for conversation, barely managing to keep herself from panic as things stood. So when Pomelia ceased her talking Lili did not press for more, intent on readying herself for anything, the worst perhaps, that Charles might have to tell her.

'Charles? A moment of your time?' she called as they drove up beside the stables where her brother was about to mount his horse.

Charles fidgeted, remote, uncomfortable. 'So sorry, Lili, but I've pressing business at the moment.' Suddenly

his face went pale. 'You haven't come to tell me that the fire's started up again?'

'Tis worse, far worse than that.' She jumped down from the carriage, rushed in his direction, dropping in her haste the stack of notes she'd brought tied in a string.

Charles recognised the sight of legal documents at once. 'Forgive me,' he replied, his manner gentled by remorse. 'We'll go inside.' He began to thumb the document pages, drawn into their content as he walked across the lawn.

In the study minutes later, Charles deposited the bundle on his desk and leaned across towards Lili and Pomelia seated on the other side. 'How could you do this? Put your signature to such debentures without speaking to me? Don't you realise what they say?'

She hung her head, ashamed, aware the worst was yet to come. 'There's something more,' she whispered, staring at her lap.

'What more is possible?'

'Tis Patrick Sloane again. Somehow he managed to acquire these notes. He's bought them from my creditors and now informs me I must pay at once or leave Bonaire.'

Pomelia jumped out of her chair. 'Is him what make de fire!'

'What do you mean? How can you know that?' Charles turned round to face her.

'Juliett say me so. She hear dem talkin', Miss Victoria an' she papa. Den de massa an de *busha*, Billy. Is dem - de massa an' him *buckra*-men what do de ting fe ruinin' Miss Lili.'

'Good Lord, he's even worse than I imagined.' Lili's eyes glazed over with amazement.

'Doubtless he's deranged. Still that does not alter things. These documents are binding, all quite legal.'

'How can that be so if Patrick set the fire?' Lili blurted. 'No magistrate would hold me to these terms in view of such extenuating circumstances. Can we not oppose him, make him pay for what he's done?'

'Perhaps, if we can prove him guilty,' Charles replied, returning his attention to Pomelia. 'Do you suppose that Juliett is willing to repeat what she has heard before a court of law?'

The mere suggestion utterly transformed the woman. Gulping, quivering from head to toe, she sank into her chair and clutched the armrests. 'Please, Sah, not you ask such. Massa Patrick, after dat, him bring Miss Juliett in Oxford Hall an' hurt she awful.'

'Not necessarily,' Charles interjected. 'If we are successful ...'

'No. She's right,' said Lili. 'We cannot place Juliett in jeopardy.' She wound her arms around Pomelia's shoulders, held her close. 'Please do not be afraid. We'll find some other way. We will Charles, won't we?' Lili gazed at him beseechingly.

Charles nodded, but without enthusiasm. 'If it is possible,' he whispered. 'How much is the total debt?'

'Four thousand pounds, but I have only seven hundred left,' she added in anticipation of his next suggestion. 'However, if I sell some clothes, some furniture perhaps ...'

'No, no. There's not sufficient time for that.' Charles shook his head. 'I've thirteen hundred I can let you borrow. That would make two thousand you can offer Mister Sloane at once.'

'Oh, do you think it even worth the effort?'

'There is nothing lost for trying,' Charles responded. 'I shall put it to the man and see what happens. Perhaps this will delay foreclosure long enough that we can find some way to raise the rest. I'll go there now and ask him.'

'Charles, do you suppose you should - in person? After everything that's happened ...'

'I was on my way to Oxford Hall when you arrived.' His own appearance wilted suddenly. 'To see my daughter.'

Lili blushed, ashamed to realise that her own concerns had dulled her sensitivity to his. 'Let me accompany you then, so you'll not have to face that wretched man alone.'



"Tis very sweet, but quite unwise I'm certain. Wait at home. I shall inform you of his answer just as soon as I have finished. Patrick Sloane is well past fighting duels. I'll be quite safe. I promise.'

'Very well,' said Lili, moving round to kiss his cheek before she led Pomelia from the house.

She managed to contain herself until they'd reached the stables. There she burst into tears and sagged against a carriage wheel. 'Pomelia, I am terrified of what might happen to him!'

'Pommie also scared fe Massa Charles,' she answered, thoughtful, contemplating. Suddenly she seemed to come to life again. 'Come fas! We go back to Bonnaire. Miss Lili stay dere like she promise Massa Charles, but Pommie, she run t'rough dem woods fe sneak up on dat house an' listen what dem *buckras* do, den run back, say Miss Lili.'

'Would you? Would you really?' Lili smiled through tears and hurried up into the carriage. 'I'm aware of what it means for you to set foot in that horrid place again.'

Pomelia smiled and took the reins. 'Miss Lili got so much what's comin' fe de time she save Tacooma, an' fe givin' Pommie chil' fe lovin'.' She paused and gazed directly into Lili's eyes. 'But maybe Missy ask fe God be lookin' while Pomelia do de ting.'

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Patrick was exultant. 'Ya should've seen the terror on 'er face, Victoria,' he boasted as he leaned to fill the crystal goblets in the music room where they'd been sharing a settee. 'The woman looked as though she spied a ghost! 'Twas worth the scratch upon m'shoulder just t'watch 'er squirm.'

Victoria stared wistfully into the ruby coloured liquid as her father poured. 'I wish I could have been there with you,' she lamented, reaching for a paring knife to separate a wedge of avocado from its skin. 'Twould do me good to see that harlot suffer.'

'What's a harlot, Mama? What has Mrs Baker done?'

Victoria slapped the knife down on the table. 'Harriot, what are you doing here?' she scolded shrilly. 'You are to be napping at this hour.'

'There's no need t'bellow at the child. She's not accustomed to her big new bed and livin' in this house yet, is she?' Patrick stretched his arms out towards the girl who smiled back from the doorway. 'Come t'Grandpapa. He'll carry ya upstairs.'

The little one ran forward and climbed into his arms. 'A story first,' she pleaded.

'No you don't, young lady ...'

'Certainly!' said Patrick. 'We'll fergive y'r mama, darlin'. She does not appreciate m'gift f'r entertainin' little ones.'

'And when had I the benefit of such a gift?' Victoria exclaimed, aware, as Patrick never could be, of the triumph gleaming in the youngster's eyes. 'You'll spoil that child for certain. There's been no controlling her since Juliett left.'

'Did she run away because my mama whipped her?' Harriot inquired sweetly, toying with an edge of Patrick's collar. 'That is what the coloureds say.'

'Don't be impertinent,' Victoria snapped. 'Juliett is wicked. Mother gave her what was due and owing.'

'No, she is not wicked!' Harriot cried out in tears. 'Miss Juliett was kind to me. She ran away because you beat her!'

'As I shall beat you if you do not behave.' Victoria started for the girl.

'Grandpa!' The child cowered under Patrick's chin.

'For heaven's sake, Victoria, she's only eight years old,' said Patrick, starting towards the doorway. 'Do not weep m'little angel. Mama shall not harm ya. Grandpapa is

here. Now, let us go upstairs and I shall tell ya how a certain fox, Rascallion, came t'outwit twenty hounds one lovely mornin' ...'

Giggles of delight accompanied the narrative that faded towards the second storey.

Victoria snatched up her goblet, drained it, poured again. At eight that horrid child was expert at manipulating men and drawing the attention of the household in upon herself. Cunning, little snip. She wished she'd never had her. She had only done so to insure that Charles would stay. And what had she to show for it? A millstone round her neck; a reminder, living proof she was no longer young nor were her possibilities unlimited. How many men would want a woman with a child to raise? Not even Charles pursued her, pleading she come back to him as, in her hearts of hearts, she'd thought would surely be the case.

She moved to huge French windows opening on the verandah. How she hated humid winds that teased eternally but never cooled the air. Indeed she'd come to loathe Jamaica more than ever, but it seemed she'd never have the chance to leave.

The sound of galloping along the drive broke through her anger, drawing her further out of doors. Impelled by curiosity, Victoria hurried to the corner of the house and peered around to see Charles reining in before the steps. At once, she hurried back, unseen, exhilarated by the notion that at last she'd have the chance to make the man eat humble pie.

'Victoria ... good afternoon.' Charles halted in the doorway to the music room, his manner tentative.

Victoria turned languidly on the settee where she'd arranged herself in a position of serene repose. 'Why Charles, whatever are you doing here?' she said as though it couldn't matter less.

'Did you not think I'd come? I cannot say I am surprised at what you've done, but to remove my child without at least conveying that intention. Have you no

consideration for the feelings of a father?'

'So 'tis Harriot concerns you. I suppose I should have guessed as much. I'm sorry, Charles, the time is past for such paternalism. Better to have thought of that before you turned your back on us for Lili Baker.'

'Turned my back?' he cried, incredulous. 'I have not turned my back, Victoria; I've done my duty for a client in accordance with the vows of my profession.'

'At the risk of ruining my father.'

'Patrick's very capable of fending for himself.'

'You have disgraced us and yourself as well.'

'Victoria, I beg of you, do not transform a legal matter into personal affront. The things I did in court were necessary and important. Patrick is a driven man. He'll stop at nothing to achieve his aims.'

'How dare you speak of him that way, and in his own house? Leave, Charles. Do not come to me again. I wish for nothing more to do with you.'

Charles slumped, deflated. 'Very well, but what of Harriot? Surely I've the right to see her. She is still my daughter.'

'Never! You relinquished your rights when you departed for Montego. I'll not have you fill that child's mind with notions of equality for African barbarians!'

'Victoria, be fair. I understand that you are cross, but is that any reason to deprive a child of her father?'

Footsteps on the staircase stopped the conversation; Patrick's presence, yet unseen, preceding him into the room.

'I thought I heard y'r voice,' he growled. 'How dare ya show y'r face, here, Rutland?'

'Charles was just departing,' said Victoria. 'He had some insane notion I'd permit him access to the child.'

'Impossible. I shall not hear of it!'

'No need for worry, Father. I've already told him it is quite out of the question.'

'You shall not dismiss me casually,' Charles snapped. 'I've something more to say, a bit of business to transact

with Mister Sloane. If you will pardon us, Victoria.'

'I shall not,' she objected. 'I've no wish to be discussed behind my back.'

'Tis not yourself I came to speak about. In deference to your feelings - certain sensitivities I know that you possess - I ask you leave us.'

'Do it,' Patrick said. 'Y'r daughter's still awake upstairs. I think she would appreciate it if her mother sat with her awhile.'

Undermined by Patrick's words Victoria left the room, enraged.

'Now what is it that ya would say t'me, Sir?' Patrick challenged. 'Do be brief. I've had a bellyful of ya.'

'I wish to speak about the liens against Miss Lili's property.'

An instant self-assurance eased the tightness out of Patrick's manner. 'What is there t'speak about? The lady is aware of my conditions. I've conveyed m'terms.'

'As I have heard, and in a most reviling manner, Sir. You are no gentleman.'

'Four thousand pounds is not to be regarded lightly.'

'You shall have your money, Sloane. I'm merely asking for some time to gather the entire sum.'

'I have already offered her a fortnight.'

'Two weeks? Do you call that reasonable?' Charles was livid. 'But we'll not debate that now. I've come about a compromise.'

'To what effect?' The older man was smug, disdainful, clearly disinclined to bend.

'We are prepared to offer half to show good faith. Two thousand now, in cash. I can deliver it by noon tomorrow.'

'What about the rest?'

Charles paused. 'We'll need a bit more time for that.'

'How much time?'

'Sixty days - until the cane at Allamanda Hall is cut and processed.'

'Unacceptable! I shall not wait while others do their sugarin' at my expense. A fortnight at the most.'

'But that is quite impossible. You are a planter. You know crops cannot be turned to coin so rapidly.'

'Indeed I do. Regrettable f'poor Miss Lili. But the fate is no concern o'mine. I think I have been admirably generous.'

''Twas you who had the fire set and brought this tragedy upon her. Don't you think we are aware of that?'

'I'll not be listenin' t'any more o'these outrageous accusations. I suggest ya go back t'yer ladyfriend, inform her she'd be well advised t'start 'er packin'. Possibly y'might suggest she take up residence at Allamanda Hall. From what I understand that would not be impossible, considerin' the closeness that exists between ya.'

'*You bastard!*' Charles exploded, hurtling across the space between them, lunging towards the other's throat.

On reflex the older man snatched up the paring knife and pointed it.

Charles froze in mid-air. For a moment he appeared to hang suspended, free of gravity's effect. Then with a little cry he lifted to his toes, eyes wide with terror, clutching at his belly as he crumpled to the floor.

'Good heavens! What has happened here?' Victoria burst in from where she had been listening behind the door. She ran to Charles and knelt above him. 'Oh my Lord - he's dead!' Her face turned ashen as she saw the knife protruding from his stomach.

There was a little gasp beyond the window. Then, 'Sweet Massa Jesus!'

'Who was that?' Her father ran to look outside. 'It was Pomelia. I am sure of it!'

'Don't be ridiculous. How could it possibly ...'

'No, no, I'd recognise that voice.' His limbs began to tremble. 'She heard everything no doubt, and must have seen ...' He stopped, unable to express it, to acknowledge what he'd done.

'What difference? This was clearly self-defence. The man assaulted you.'

'And if I'm disbelieved?'

Victoria gazed up at him, a burst of inspiration glowing in her smile. 'There'd be no question if I were to say 'twas I who did this.'

'You?' He gaped, confounded.

'Naturally. I'd merely state that he attacked you in my presence with intent to kill. The two of you were struggling and I did the only thing I could to save my father.'

Patrick paused, considering. 'But that would be too great a sacrifice, too much for anyone t' ask. How would ya bear the scandal afterward?' The eagerness and desperation in his eyes belied the altruism of his words.

'Not if I were to leave Jamaica,' said Victoria. 'Then I should never have to face it. I'd be far removed from anyone who knew, forever.'

Patrick trembled with relief. 'And would ya do that f'r me?'

'Certainly. I am your daughter, am I not?'

'And what about y'r own?'

She turned away, unwilling to display the smirk she could not hold inside herself. 'Another sacrifice. But still, 'tis necessary. You cannot expect a woman by herself to raise a child properly. Besides, you have this fine huge house and many slaves ...'

'Of course, of course,' her father said, perceiving instantly, agreeing to the ultimatum, thoughts already focused elsewhere. 'Very well, let us review the tale we are about to tell the marshal. Then we shall despatch a slave to fetch him while I speak to Billy Austin.'

'Billy? Why?' Victoria turned back to face the man.

'Because, m'dear,' said Patrick in a voice gone husky with obsession, 'there is no one else I trust. No one better suited to unearth Pomelia's whereabouts.'

Something happened to her when Pomelia realised Massa Charles was dead. She did not think about it, did not question it but yielded instantly, completely, to a primal force that rose to take control of her, direct her, save her from the hunter's clutches. Instantly it spun her from the window, sent her flying past the balustrade and up into a coco palm not twenty feet from Patrick's doorway, there to crouch, invisible within the greenery, awaiting nightfall.

'Victoria m'dear, ya mustn't blame y'self f'r this. Ya simply had no choice!'

The plea seemed useless as the woman wept into her hands, great, gasping spasms rippling her slender shoulders.

Sighing, Patrick turned to face the other person in the room. 'Y'r Lordship ... Jason ... *please*. Say somethin' to 'er. Maybe you'll be able to convince the woman. As y'see, my efforts are t'no avail.'

'Why, certainly - be glad to try.' Jarred suddenly from contemplation brought about by several after dinner brandies, Justice Brisbane pushed his huge frame backward from the dining table, tugged the napkin from his collar. 'Mrs Rutland, I have known your father twenty years and in this time I've come to see him as a special gentleman. A man who stands above the rest, a leader and a veritable inspiration to this colony.' He paused, uncertain if his words were getting through. 'By that I mean to say the high regard in which I hold him must be meagre as compared with the affection and respect a daughter feels. No man of conscience on this



island would think ill of you for trying to protect your parent.'

'You may look at it that way, but what about the coroner?' Victoria whimpered. 'Shall I be forced to bear the horrors of a public inquest, to reveal before my little girl and all the world how Charles, undoubtedly berserk, burst through that door ...' Her words trailed off again into violent weeping.

'Victoria, I'm sure Jason can arrange t'spare ya further torment. We are Christians after all, dispensing justice with compassion. Jason, isn't that the case?'

The man smiled stiffly. 'I shall see to it myself. There'll be no inquest. You've my word upon it.'

'Did y'hear that, darlin'?' Patrick stooped to wind an arm about her shoulders. Time t'put this all behind ya. I believe a journey would be best, a holiday at home in England. Jason, wouldn't y'agree?'

'Without a doubt,' the justice answered. 'Best thing is to change the scenery and you'll soon forget.'

'I'll toast t'that,' said Patrick, moving to the side-board, reaching for the brandy. 'And as long as you are here m'friend, I've come upon a keen investment I am sure would be of interest to ya. Shall we step out f'r a breath of air t'speak of it?'

The two men ambled onto the verandah, passing out of earshot just in time to miss the laughter that replaced Victoria's pretended tears.

The evening sky was brilliantly alight with twinkling stars. Pomelia shimmied down from hiding, slipped across the lawn into the cover of the cane fields, and continued moving southward, past the road beside the sea up towards the mountains and the winding rails that twisted through dense jungle. Higher, and higher she climbed beyond the *buckra*'s territory towards the refuge of Green Gully.

'What do ya mean y'cannot find 'er?' Patrick bellowed at the overseer in the bedroom doorway. 'I depended on ya

Billy Austin and you've failed me. Is that how ya wish t'let the matter rest?

'We've searched the parish end to end; I swear it,' Billy murmured, pale, disgraced. 'The men and I have scoured Falmouth and Montego. We've checked with every captain in both harbours. She has disappeared without a trace.'

'Exactly what you said when Juliett absconded,' Victoria reminded acidly and closed the trunk that she'd been packing. Do you think that someone has already found these slaves and sold them elsewhere, possibly a person privy to the news of when such runaways depart and where they hide?

Billy stiffened at the inference. 'No, ma'am, 'tis not the case - at least so far as I'm aware.' He turned with pleading eyes towards Patrick. 'Fifteen years have I been in y'r service, Mister Sloane ...'

'I know,' said Patrick. 'Where d'ya suppose they run to? Juliett, Pomelia - and that other one, Tacooma. Vanished. Possibly there's some connection.'

'Hardly likely,' Billy shook his head. 'If they were hereabouts we surely would have sniffed 'em out eventually.'

'That's it! Precisely what we'll do!' cried Patrick. Billy, have a curricke brought round at once. We're off to Rio Bueno.'

'Rio Bueno?' said Victoria, her forehead wrinkling with confusion. 'What on earth will that accomplish?'

Patrick was already buttoning his waistcoat. 'There is a man there name o'Perkins, raises Cuban bloodhounds trained t'find a fugitive by followin' his scent. A shoe, a piece of clothing, any little thing is quite enough t'show the dogs what they are after. Surely there is somethin' left behind by Juliett.'

'Undoubtedly,' Victoria agreed, aglow with sudden comprehension.

'Splendid.' Patrick grinned from ear to ear. 'If that one's with Pomelia, Perkins' hounds will lead us t'the two of 'em!'

Pomelia sat beside Tacooma, paralysed by the enormity of what was so. She wanted to wake him yet knew he must sleep in order that he work the fields.

As though he'd sensed her need, Tacooma sat up suddenly and blinked, surprised. 'You come back early! Ting be good den at Bonnaire? Miss Lili fine?' The look upon Pomelia's face impelled him towards her. 'Pommie, say me what be happen.'

'Is Massa Charles. Him dead,' she answered dully. Then she told the rest.

'Miss Lili - what she say?'

Pomelia hung her head. 'Me 'fraid fe Massa Patrick see Pomelia, an' me run Green Gully. Not go say Miss Lili.'

'Not you cry,' Tacooma murmured, hugging her as though his closeness could absorb her pain. 'Tacooma go down in Bonnaire an' say Miss Lili what be so.'

'Pomelia goin' too.'

'No. She stay here.' He held her out to arm's length, staring hard into her eyes. 'If Massa Patrick lookin' fe Pomelia, bes' she not be dere in *buckra*-country. Go wid Daniel. Stay dere wid Miss Juliett an' Sybil fe de night. Me come back, get you after. Yes?'

Pomelia nodded, guilty still, but yielding to the will of her beloved husband.

Victoria closed the final trunk and gazed across the chamber towards the sound of fingers drumming on a table.

'Father, will you never stop this?' she demanded.

'Sinful that a man should start t'lose his stamina just when the mind is in its prime,' he grumbled, leaning to gaze out beyond the shutters towards a setting sun. 'If I'd been fit t'ride into the hills the matter would be settled now.'

'But you are not and so you simply must be patient. I am certain Billy will succeed.' She pursed her lips disdainfully. 'He so desires your approval.'

Patrick did not hear, or chose to disregard the barb. Instead he moved up to the window sill, eyes straining to

see further in the distance. 'There he is, I'm certain of it!' Red-faced, breathing heavily, he turned and hurried from the room.

He reached the front verandah, hobbling, grimacing with pain. Collapsing in a chair he cursed the gouty toe that kept him from preferred pursuits and forced himself to wait, unmoving, till the overseer showed his face.

Whistling, Billy Austin strode around the corner of the house and up to the verandah. 'Good evenin', Sir. And a lovely evenin' it is turnin' out t'be!'

'Please spare the humbug,' Patrick snapped, 'and tell me everything that's happened.'

Billy took a chair and hooked his legs across the rail. 'Tis done. Your worryin' is at an end.'

'You've got Pomelia?' Patrick wheezed, inclined to shout for joy.

'Well, not exactly.'

'What have you accomplished then? I thought you said ...'

'I said y'r worryin' is over and I meant it.' Billy winked and cocked his head in the direction of the stables. 'What I've done will keep Pomelia quiet. She'll not be so quick t'risk y'r anger now by speakin' out.'

'And what is it you've done?'

The overseer grinned and clasped his hands behind his head, self-satisfied, content. 'I've got her boy!'

## 30

She flew along the road, half mad, tormented by the pictures in her mind. For hours they had searched through fields and forest lands - Miss Juliett, herself, and half the population of Green Gully - calling Daniel's name until the mountains rang with it. And all to no

avail. He'd vanished. Disappeared as though he'd never been.

At last the final turn out of the mountains to the place that overlooked the coastal lands. Two thousand acres of Bonnaire spread out below, blackened, desolate. Swallowing her tears Pomelia hurried onward, praying all the while Miss Lili and Tacooma would be there to help her.

The news of Charles' death had left Lili drained and exhausted. She reached the bottom of the stairs and dragged herself across the gallery to the sewing room.

'You say him?' asked Tacooma, turning from the window.

'Andrew is so weak, so enervated from the fever still, I could not find it in myself to share such sorry news.'

The black man nodded, comprehending. 'Bes' fe him be strong firs'. Plenty ting what Massa Andrew gots to stand agains' when him fin' out.'

The sound of footsteps turned her towards the doorway as Mirtilla entered with a tray of tea and johnnycakes.

'You gots to eat a ting,' the woman said, her voice a rasping whisper as she placed the food upon a table. 'Supper late tonight fe waitin' on Miss Emily.' She straightened, gazing into Lili's eyes, expressing with her own the misery that held them all its captive.

Lili burst into tears and fell into Mirtilla's arms. 'I am to blame for this - I know I am! To think a man's life has been taken. And for what?'

Mirtilla hugged her tightly. 'Maybe dere's a reason - somethin' not fe we to know till time pass.'

Lili drew back searching Mirtilla's face to find the meaning of the woman's words. The woman's eyes were bright with staunch resolve clearly communicating, just as Granny would, that it was *Nyankupon* who brought all things about for reasons best perceived by higher powers. Lili turned from what she felt to be a silent

accusation, fighting not to crumble neath the burden of her guilt.

'*Pomelia!*' cried Tacooma as the sound of footsteps pounded rapidly across verandah floorboards.

'Daniel gone!' she screeched, eyes bulging wild with terror. 'Him be dere one minute, an' de nex' ...'

'Say me what you know,' he ordered, 'Not be time fe cryin' - time fe *doin'*!'

Pomelia nodded, swallowing her tears. 'Me gots no answer,' she declared, eyes moving round the room, acknowledging Mirtilla and Lili. 'Me dere in de house fe wait Miss Juliett feed de baby. Daniel jus' outside me tinkin'. When me call him an' de boy not come, me look de river where him maybe go fe swim. Den roun' de village, t'rough de fields. Him gone, me sayin' - gone widdout me knowin' where!'

Tacooma turned to Lili. Instant, total understanding passed between them as the memory of time gone by arose to tell them what had happened to the boy, and what must now be done to set him free.

The sensation of regressing ten years back in time, of living out this horror once again, evoked within Tacooma feelings of bizarre and frightening unreality. And yet, as he crept stealthily through the shadows towards the back of the house, he knew that this indeed was real and though a decade had gone by the child, Daniel, was no safer from the grasp of Patrick Sloane than he, himself, had once been. Quivering with rage and the urge to leap from hiding and assail the man responsible, Tacooma slipped into the mansion, inched along a hall and ducked in through the doorway leading to the cellar.

'Surely Mrs Baker, I'd have thought you'd have heard by now.'

'I've not heard anything,' said Lili, glaring back at

Patrick, Billy, and Victoria while mustering whatever strength she had to play this horrible charade.

'Twas most unfortunate. A sorry thing indeed. My daughter and myself were in the music room when Charles came running in. He was beyond all reason, agitated by the combination of his marital distress and my possession of the liens against Bonnaire, no doubt.'

Teeth clenched, knees quaking, Lili took a seat, attempting to block out the words, pretending she was listening as the man droned on about her brother's death - aware that what she felt right now was less important than the pretence of attention that would buy Tacooma time.

Every inch of cellar wall - each stone and crate and barrel - was familiar still, as though he'd been imprisoned in this dungeon merely days ago. Tacooma inched around a corner through the maze of cubicles that led into the murky dimness at the farthest end - the place where he had once been trapped.

A spate of memories burst forth, more hideous, more frightening for the fact that Daniel, just a boy, was subject to the torment that Tacooma had been put through. Fighting not to call out to the child, Tacooma reached into a pocket, found a candle and lit it.

Shadows danced beyond the halo of the flame, recalling dangers lurking in the darkness. Muttering, Tacooma hurried onward, knowing in himself that if one rat, one galli-wasp had sunk its teeth into the child's flesh, the man responsible would die, no matter what the consequences.

A shadow, no, a silhouette before him in a corner. 'Daniel-boy. *Bayeyere*,' Tacooma whispered, hurrying in that direction.

Muffled groaning, then a sight that nearly stopped his heart: the boy bound hand and foot, mouth tied with filthy rags, abandoned on the cold stone floor.

'Me here now. Tata come fe you,' Tacooma whispered, reaching for a knife to cut the strips of cloth that gagged

the child, the lengths of rope that cut into his wrists and ankles. 'Not make sound. Not say a ting,' he added, close to Daniel's ear. 'Miss Lili an' Tacooma gots a carriage waitin'. We takes you 'way from here to someplace where you safe fe always.'

'Then you think that Avery will agree?'

'No doubt about it,' Emily replied, her fingers reaching out for Lili's hand. 'Besides, what choice is there for us? We'll have to go to England now. 'Tis only that I hate to leave you.'

'Do not think about it,' Lili answered, too intent upon what must be done to yield to stirrings of emotion. 'My place is here with Andrew, and you know he'll never leave. Come now, let us tell the others.' Stiffly Lili rose and led the way out of the sewing room.

In the library Daniel sat with Tacooma and Pomelia hovering on either side.

'Tis settled,' Lili said, her voice gone flat with resignation. 'Emily and Daniel will depart for Kingston in the morning. Avery's ship will have arrived before them and the child can be concealed within it till the time for sailing.'

Hearing this Pomelia burst out crying, wrapping her arms around the boy.

Tacooma rushed to gather both of them in his embrace. 'Not make dis time more sorry den it be,' he begged, eyes misting as they turned towards Pomelia. 'Bes' ting dis we do fe Daniel.'

Emily rushed forward and knelt between Pomelia and the child. 'I promise Captain Avery and I shall care for Daniel just as if he were our own,' she murmured. 'He shall have a home and education suitable for a nobleman.'

'Is dat me cares de mos' about,' Tacooma said in solemn tones. 'De schoolin' make de difference fe de boy. Is time fe negga learn dem ting from book an' paper so dey's up dere wid de *buckra* soon.'

'You're absolutely right and Lili has assured it,' Emily



concluded. 'The money she has given me will more than pay for Daniel's education. You shall see. When we return someday you will be proud of him.'

Tacooma squatted next to the settee and placed a hand on Daniel's shoulder. 'You too young me spec' fe understan' dis all. But trus' you tata when him say you dat Miss Lili savin' Daniel, givin' him his life. You gots to tank she, boy. You gots to say de lady.'

Daniel turned but she was gone, and in her wake he heard the sound of footsteps hurrying along the stairs.

The light of dawn had kissed the mountain tops and cane fields by the time that Lili stopped her crying. Enervated, numb, she splashed cool water on her face and reached into her cupboard for a change of clothes. The hardest day of all her life awaited her: the day when she must bid her son farewell, then tell her husband they would have to leave Bonnaire.

## PART THREE

### *Trelawny Parish, Jamaica: 1856*

For the first few moments of awareness he was dazed, disoriented. Daniel raised a forearm to his eyes against the sunlight. Lost in vague, abstract sensation, he meandered up from sleep and peeled a swollen tongue back from his palate, wincing at the after-taste of liquor and the feel of sweat soaked linen pasted to his flesh. The heaviness of humid, stationary air pressed down upon him, sounds of commerce underneath the window burst upon his consciousness and in a single instant when the breath caught in his lungs and his heartbeat seemed to falter he remembered where he was and how he'd spent the night: the inn beside the road from Kingston . . . revellers round a keg of rum . . . a girl named Delia . . .

Panicking, he rolled onto his stomach. Shaky fingers searched beneath the bed until they found the edges of a portmanteau then fumbled past its bindings, groping till their touch confirmed the presence of a tattered bible, letters packed together and a money pouch stuffed full and tied with string. Relieved, he rolled onto his back again, content to drift among his thoughts until the pounding at his temples lessened and his legs felt strong enough to bear his weight.

He was really in Jamaica. It was happening at last.

The wonder, the enormity of what was so, churned through his entrails, burst across his mind in waves of feeling that engulfed him, held him captive, bounced him mercilessly between the joy of expectation and the darkness of despair. Clear visions of the home he knew, the ones he loved - Aunt Emily and Uncle Avery - mixed with cherished memories of others he had once called Mother, Father; dark, adoring faces that had left their

mark upon him so indelibly that life away from them had been a waiting game, a question of passing time and gathering strength for this return. Yet he was filled with apprehension for what might result from this reunion.

Tiny shudders over copper-coloured flesh fanned from the hardness of his chest along a tight, lean torso into long, thick muscled legs. Daniel lifted to an elbow, scowling, shamed to think that fear could get the best of him. To shrink, to hide from life's vicissitudes had never been his way. Aunt Emily had seen to that. And Uncle Avery. Beneath their watchful eyes he'd learned since childhood days that it was his responsibility - indeed, his obligation - to create in life a true reflection of himself, instead of trying, as so many did, to blend with tepid anonymity into the world around him. Doubtless, if such blending had been necessary for survival he'd have long since given up the ghost, for being coloured in the midst of rural England was, by definition, to be set apart.

And set apart he'd been, not only by the colour of his skin but by Aunt Emily's 'crusade' as he had come to think of it - her plan for him - a vision for his future so intense, so all consuming he had never thought to question it. While other children toiled from dawn to dark in factories and coal mines, Daniel laboured at his lessons, waking hours fashioned by the never ending line of tutors in his life. Indeed, the only discord he had ever witnessed in the household came about when he'd turned seventeen as a result of Uncle Avery's declaration that no boy could grow into a normal man if all he knew were books and studies. It was then that Uncle took charge of his education, introduced him to another world - a life of sailing ships, adventure, ribald harbour towns with names like New Orleans and Halifax where liquor flowed and women made such magic for a bit of gold it took his breath away and sent him soaring dizzily to heights of ecstasy he'd never dreamed were his to know.

And yet, despite this wonderous freedom there remained within him the awareness that at best it must be temporary, that more meaningful pursuits awaited his

attention. Hesitant, he'd circled round his destiny until, no longer able to deny it, he'd returned to England, told Aunt Emily that he was ready to fulfil her dream at last - her promise to return him as a man to parents who had entrusted him, their only child, into her care.

The thought of changes wrought by twenty years of passing time renewed his feelings of uneasiness. What did he really know about Tacooma and Pomelia, and how much was true of what he could remember? Faces, certainly, and voices: hers a lilting, velvet sound shored up in times of trouble by profound, serene belief in God; his, deep, reverberant, intense with boundless energy, a fierce, raw strength supported by a lifeline reaching backward still to Africa. Indeed, the combination of their essences was deeply rooted in the alchemy of Daniel's own perspective - Tata's savage passions boiling just beneath the surface, tempered by Pomelia's more retiring, patient ways. Yet Daniel knew, had always sensed that there was something more within his chemistry, another influence, yet undefined, that kept him searching always after something of himself and drew him back now, surely, to Jamaica - just as surely as Aunt Emily's assertion that he must one day return.

The sound of footsteps just outside the door propelled him into motion. Daniel yanked the bedsheet up above his nakedness as creaking hinges pierced the air and huge dark eyes looked in at him, alight with merriment, the glow of intimacy.

'You sleepin' long time dere.' The girl's voice, knowing, mischievous, preceded her into the room. 'Me tinkin' maybe dat it kill de English *mustee-man* fe tumble-down wid Delia.'

'Do not call me *mustee-man*,' he snapped, his pleasure at the sound of Creole dialect obliterated by the local appellation for the offspring of quadroon and white. The word creating distance, separating him from her and activating thoughts, considerations he was not prepared to deal with.

Delia gaped in silence, failing to perceive why he

should be offended by his heritage, a lighter hue of skin that every Negro in Jamaica envied. Shrugging, she reached back to close the door, her smile licentious, confident. 'De massa not be *fenky-fenky* after Delia do.' She moved to open up her dress.

'Not now. There isn't time,' he answered awkwardly as firm, full breasts came into view, smooth coffee-coloured flesh on which he'd glugged half the night in desperate attempt to force away his fear of what this day might bring.

'Not take much time.'

He wrenched his gaze away from her and gathered up a pile of coins upon the night stand. 'I cannot remain here any longer,' he insisted as he pressed the gold into her palm and closed her fingers round it. 'I must dress myself and hurry to Green Gully.'

Daniel felt the tension in her fingers as the hand pulled back.

'Is dat de place you goin'?' Delia breathed, her voice grown husky with dismay. 'Is where you mumma an' you tata be?'

'It is,' he answered, searching her expression, frightened by the worry there, the gleam of fear. 'What is the matter? What is it you know?'

She buttoned up her dress, her gaze averted. 'Yesterday dere's men what come fe drinkin' - *buckra*-men what's sayin' how dat village burn.'

'Green Gully? Are you certain?'

'Delia sure on dat. De growin' land up dere all black wid fire. No sense in goin' now ...'

'Dear God!' cried Daniel, lunging for his clothes.

Daniel raced the horse he'd rented at the inn along the winding, dusty road that rose into the foothills. His youth came back to him as he galloped past familiar places - bubbling streams in cool green grottos; pastures thick with guinea-grass through which he'd stalked imaginary beasts in boyhood. Suddenly the years were meaningless, the distance he had feared no longer real to

him as in his heart he ached with caring, yearned for reassurance that Pomelia and Tacooma were unharmed.

The stench of smoke assailed his nostrils. The scene was even worse than Delia prophesied: a dozen buildings smouldering, their rafters charred and hanging at odd angles; groves of breadfruit trees and fields of arrowroot beyond them blackened, decimated; over all a sooty haze that clouded everything.

He looked about but could not find a face he recognised. He leaped to the ground and elbowed through the crush of people along a rutted trail in the direction of his parents' house. At last he reached the slope above the valley where their cottage stood and stopped in mid-stride, gaping, frozen, captured by the sight before him.

He was older and thinner. His grey hair gone to white, the texture of his flesh turned leather in the hollows of his cheeks, around his eyes, but he was unmistakably Tacooma. 'Father ... Tata!' Daniel's voice was hoarse and quavering with love and excitement.

Slowly, cautiously, the man turned round. Miraculously, wrinkles seemed to smooth; eyes dulled by sadness, weariness, lit up with recognition. 'Bayeyere!' He flung himself across the space between them, arms spread wide to seize the younger man and hug him close, so tightly that the breath rushed out of Daniel's lungs.

'You back wid we. You home!'

He closed his eyes, desiring to yield completely and to savour the delight of welcome, but there was no blocking from his mind the image which had greeted him: the house in shambles, badly scorched, one wall peeled back, half open to the elements.

'What's happened, Ta? What is the meaning of this?' Daniel murmured when the trembling arms let go of him at last. 'Where's mumma?'

Glinting eyes turned dull again. 'She inside dere,' Tacooma nodded towards the ravaged building. 'Bes' you wait fe see you mumma till she stronger some an' got de chance fe hear you back.'

But Daniel could not wait. With powerful strides he bounded up the steps and burst in through the doorway.

Gloom and desolation hovered like a pall, transforming what had been the home of childhood years into a waiting place for death. A dozen women glanced up from their vigil round an old straw bed, eyes flickering with curiosity, alarm, admonishing this pale intruder not to break the silence lest he snap the fragile thread by which Pomelia's life was dangling. But he would not be dissuaded, could not yield to hopelessness, passivity. Impelled by love, the certainty of its ability to heal, he moved beyond the fearful gazes, knelt beside the bed and called out softly to the woman lying there, head swathed in bandages, dark bruises covering her arms and neck.

'Tis Daniel, mumma.' Massive fingers cupped a tiny hand. 'Can you hear me? I've returned.'

Pomelia's tenuous, elusive spirit seemed to stir again; a weary sigh escaped parched, withered lips. Her mouth began to move, reshaped as though to speak, exuding just the faintest wheeze, a mere suggestion of response.

From somewhere help appeared; a beautiful mulatto girl with mild, caring eyes who touched a dampened cloth against Pomelia's clammy skin. The woman's lips pursed, tentatively, inquisitively at first, then greedily, to suckle drops of water, eager once again for nourishment, for life.

Through misting vision Daniel watched the change spread across Pomelia's countenance, revitalising flesh and muscle till at last the wrinkled eyelids fluttered and the eyes beneath them focused, feasting on the sight of him.

'Me seein' dis fe true?' Pomelia's voice, an echo of its former self, appeared to emanate from some incalculable distance. 'Daniel?'

'Yes, 'tis I - indeed it is!' he answered, grinning with relief, ignoring the tears upon his cheeks. 'You must get well now. The two of us shall speak when you are stronger.'



Shaky fingers crept in search of his. 'Me dyin', boy. Dere not be long fe speakin' now.'

'No, you are not. You mustn't!' Daniel cried and moved to draw her close, to shelter her in his embrace as though the strength of his devotion could dispel whatever forces were at work to steal her life away. 'You cannot die. I need you, mumma. More than ever. We must be a family once again.'

He felt the import of his words take hold, reviving flaccid muscle, warming flesh that had lain dormant, passive, brutalised beyond all hope of reclamation. 'Tell dem udders go,' Pomelia whispered. 'Pommie gots a ting what's hurtin' inside - what's been wid she always since you gone in Englan'. Maybe dat why Massa Jesus sen' dis sufferin' fe punish sinner fe dem lie dey tell.'

The other women heard her. Soundlessly, respectfully, they melted off into the distance, leaving Daniel and Pomelia by themselves.

'You mustn't say such things about yourself,' he murmured, nervous suddenly. 'The past is done.'

Moist, guilty eyes gazed fearfully towards some private, inner place. 'Is sometime when we gots to do a ting fe help a one we love. Say what be false fe save a life ...'

'I understand that,' Daniel whispered, trembling, terrified, the breath like fire in his chest.

'If Pommie say you dat she do a ting once, tell a tale fe Daniel what be 'ceitful ...'

'Please don't,' he insisted, panicking. 'There's nothing you have done I'm certain. Nothing you can tell me that would change the way I feel about you.'

'Even if you mumma not de same you tink fe all dese year? An' dat Pomelia jus' ...'

From somewhere deep within him rose a force that lifted Daniel to his feet, a horrible awareness threatening his sanity.

'I know what you are saying,' he replied, his voice gone dry, the veins beneath his jawline throbbing. 'I have

known it always. That, in part, is why I have returned, to hear it from your lips, to know it was not madness or some vile ingratitude that caused me to suspect as much.'

'An' now you hate Pomelia, yes, fe sayin' she you mumma.'

'Hate you?' Daniel whirled to face her. 'How could that be possible? There's nothing changed for knowing.' Desperate, he hurried back to clasp her hands, to brush the tears from wizened cheeks. 'You are the only mother I have ever known. Tacooma is my only father. I've no need to hear the rest.'

'No. Dat not be de right way. Daniel gots to see de lady what's him mumma true. Him gots to say she how him know what's so now, an' him understan'. She sufferin' fe sure, same like Pomelia all dese year. She hurtin' from dat secret.'

'Perhaps ... sometime,' he answered, ill-at-ease, evasive, overwhelmed to realise he had lost, irrevocably, any chance of turning from the truth and finding sanctuary once again in blessed ignorance. 'Twill all come right eventually, I promise,' he continued, gentler now, concerned lest his discomfort cause Pomelia further pain. 'Please, just be well and we shall sort this out together when you're feeling better.'

'Bes' you goin' now me tink,' an unexpected voice coaxed, velvet soft behind his shoulder.

Daniel turned to find himself engulfed by eyes that flashed concern. The girl who'd brought Pomelia water nodded urgently towards the doorway. 'Auntie need fe restin' some. Is good she see you. Little firs' den more when she be stronger.'

Daniel looked for confirmation towards Pomelia, but the woman's eyes were closed and she lay motionless.

'Not worry,' said the other, soothing Daniel with a tender touch upon his forearm. 'She jus' sleepin' now. But Auntie happy. An' she better soon. You see dat smile on she face?'

He felt inclined to thank this stranger, to express his gratitude for kindnesses bestowed, but all that he could

manage was a nod, a half smile. Driven by the pain of raw emotion Daniel raced out of the cottage, dazed, distraught, preoccupied with what he knew until he heard Tacooma's voice beside him.

'Mumma sleepin' - sleepin' all de time.' The misery upon the old man's face revealed the terror he had tried to hide from Daniel earlier. 'Me 'fraid she soon be gone from we.'

'No, Ta. She woke. She talked to me.'

'She speak? Fe true? She know you dere?' Tacooma's eyes were sparkling, wet with tears of gratitude, relief, amazement.

'She'll recover. I am sure of it.'

The old man turned to hide emotion he could not control. 'Me happy sure fe dat. But what we do now? How we live?' Tacooma pointed to the devastation spread before them, ugly scars where flame had scorched the fields and hillsides.

'We'll rebuild. Erect new houses. Plant new crops ...'

'Fe *buckra* come an' burn?'

'No, Ta. This time it will be different.' Daniel placed his hand upon the old man's shoulder. 'I am back with you. I'll see to your protection. You have only to attend to mumma.'

Swallowing, Tacooma turned, a smile of pride and trust emerging round the corners of his lips. When eyes communicated more than grown men dared to speak aloud, he flung his arms round Daniel's shoulders. Just as swiftly then the outburst ended. Drawing back into himself Tacooma straightened, wiped his face and hurried off into the little house while Daniel stood humbled in the wake of love's uncanny revelations.

Minutes passed or hours; Daniel could not tell, caught up within the turmoil of unleashed emotion. It was done; the truth revealed at last. No need for peeping at it round the corners of his mind or torturing himself with doubt and suspicion. Yet there still remained the fact that somewhere on this island was a 'lady' who had given life to him then turned her back, abandoning her child,

repudiating ties of flesh and blood, denying him her love and her protection.

Blind, excruciating rage ensnared him, twisting, choking, wresting anguished sobs from Daniel's throat. He sank down to the forest floor and thrust his face into his palms, defeated by what had to be, defenceless, trapped. He knew Pomelia, loved her, understood her need for him to meet his mother, make his peace with her. Of course, he'd have to do it for Pomelia's sake, yet to come face-to-face with someone who'd rejected him, denied him as an infant what was every child's birthright made him feel like a man who faced the gallows. There was no preparing for it, no escape, and no survival.

'Not be worry so bout Miss Pomelia. She be mendin' soon now dat she boy come home fe stay.'

He turned and met the gaze of Pomelia's nurse her doe-soft eyes smiling at him with warmth and kindness, telling him it was safe, acceptable, to let his feelings show.

'Damnation!' Daniel balled his fingers into fists and clenched his teeth. 'I do not understand this - any of it.'

'Much a burden sure fe Daniel come so far an' fin' dis sadness,' said the girl lowering herself beside him, skirt tucked modestly beneath her knees. 'Is trouble here now in Green Gully - not dat joy an' gladness fe you comin' home what Auntie prayin' on so long.'

He stared at her, intrigued. 'How is it that you know my name and so much about my . . . mother? Do you live here in the village?'

The girl looked down, smiled bashfully, her features softened by the play of sunlight through the trees on honey coloured skin. 'Me here when Daniel here. Not you remember Sybil an' she mumma, Juliett?'

His eyes grew wide, incredulous. 'You? *Baby* Sybil?' Daniel burst out laughing. 'I should never have suspected it. Just look at you - a full grown woman, and a beauty too!'

She giggled with embarrassment. Long, slender fingers rushed to cover delicate lips.

Immediately, Daniel wished he hadn't spoken quite so plainly, fearful that his words had made him seem capricious or shallow in the light of present circumstances.

'Tell me what has happened here,' he said, his manner solemn now. 'Why were the fields and houses burned?'

The girl returned his steady gaze, at ease again, available for honest interchange. 'Is comin' on fe long time,' she began. 'Dem *buckra*-planter wan' fe negga work de cane fiel'. Wan' dem come back on dem big plantation 'stead of growin' ting fe sell up in de mountain village.'

'But the slavery days are over. They've no right to make such demands. We are freeholders now. These lands are ours. Miss Lili and the Reverend Baker bought them for us years ago.'

'Is maybe bes' you go fe see Miss Lili den an' say such like Pomelia ask fe Daniel do.'

He froze, suspended, finding in her eyes the answer to the question he'd not dared to ask Pomelia. 'Then you know,' he murmured weakly.

She nodded.

'Tis Miss Lili?' Daniel's voice was shaking.

'Yes.' She reached to take his fingers, warm them in her own; a simple gesture of support, commiseration. 'Long time be Miss Lili sayin' bout you, Daniel, all dese year you gone in Englan'. Sure dat lady carin' fe you special.'

Daniel pulled away, his spine turned rigid. 'How would you be privy to such information if I might inquire?'

'Long time me knows Miss Lili. From when Sybil little an' she mumma bring she in de mission school. Den when Miss Lili call fe dem what love de Massa Jesus work dere in de sick house what she makin' fe dem country people got no doctor-man. Dat lady always sayin' on you, readin' out dem paper come from Englan'.'

'Letters from Aunt Emily. Of course,' he thought aloud.

'Dat so. Me know de name. Miss Lili say me always,

"Tell Pomelia dat Miss Emily say dis bout Daniel, dat bout Daniel." She be proud fe you mos' certain - how you growin' strong an' learn fe read an' write same like de *buckra* ...'

'If that is the case why did she give me up? Why did she pack me off to England?' Daniel blurted.

'Sure de lady gots a reason.'

'To avoid the scandal of my presence, I should think.'

A heavy silence hung between them. Sybil gazed through eyes grown wise beyond their years. 'Fe sure de only way you ease you mind on dis is by you goin' dere fe say Miss Lili, ask dem ting what she de only one fe answer.'

'I'm not certain that I wish to see her.'

Sybil smiled encouragement. 'Me gots to see dat lady too now, fetch de medicine fe Auntie. Wan' you come wid Sybil, say Miss Lili bot' togedder?'

'Would you come with me?' he burst out, then slumped, aware that he had gone too far to change his mind without appearing cowardly.

'Me glad fe do such,' Sybil murmured, tugging playfully upon his sleeve. 'Soon you be seein' dat Miss Lili one fine lady love you plenty. Come ...' She hurried to her feet. 'We ride down on you big white horse fe make surprise.'

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A hundred things to do and half the day gone by already. There was never time enough to attend to everything and everybody ...

Lili scrubbed her way along the aisle between two rows of beds, rose from her hands and knees and bent to clasp

the bucket handle. Suddenly the world began to tilt, the floorboards, gleaming wet, to blur and sway. She grasped the doorframe, slipped around it out of sight and sagged against a wall, eyes closed until the dizziness subsided. She must get some rest. She'd promised Andrew. Soon, she thought as though she were addressing him. *As soon as Doctor Cooke has been and gone.*

The urgency of tasks at hand impelled her back to motion. Sweeping wisps of silver hair from cheeks and forehead, Lili moved across the ante-room and sank into a straight-backed chair beside a table piled with bandages fresh washed and waiting to be folded. As she reached for them she felt a crinkling of paper in her bodice, paused and smiled despite her weariness, transported for the moment past the cares of here and now.

*... our Daniel is returning to Jamaica. Finally, dear Lili, he's prepared I think to face the truths of his existence. Pity this could not have happened sooner; still I'm sure you would agree that matters of this sort must find their resolutions in their own good time. Although the years have stretched far longer than we had intended, I expect that his arrival will be no less welcome, and I pray it brings the peace of mind you've longed for and which, heaven knows, you've earned.*

*With love abiding,  
Emily*

She knew the words by heart, had read them over and again until the ink was smudged, the paper stained with tears of joy. For weeks she'd kept the letter close beside her heart to comfort her, sustain her, reassure her she was not imagining. Her son was coming home. At last the years of waiting, hoping, were to reach an end.

'Miss Lili ... please ... you dere?'

The sound of someone's need took precedence, as always, over personal considerations. 'I am here, Miss

Lucy. I am coming.' Lili forced a cheery tone and hurried back to the infirmary.

The stench of illness mixed with camphor to create a heady thickness in the air that no breeze, not even constant scrubbing, could dispel. Ignoring this, committed to the nursing of the sick, the comfort of the dying, Lili hurried round the screen that segregated one bed from the others in the room.

'Me gut, Miss Lili. Pain come once again dere in me belly, hot like fire.'

'Then we shall have to make it go away,' she answered, reaching out to clasp a hand, to smile encouragement at gentle eyes that cholera had framed with rings of black.

The ancient woman who had been a Bonnaire slave gazed up at Lili, docile, trusting, drifting in her mind towards other times and other places.

'Lucy prayin' all de time fe see Miss Lili livin' back dere in Bonnaire wid pretty ting fe wear an' big fine carriage wid prancin' horses take she in Montego Bay ...' A wistful smile broke through the pain of nausea and dehydration.

'I am quite contented at the mission,' Lili murmured, swallowing against the sting of memories she, too, could not escape. 'My work is here now with the Reverend and the people in the mountain villages.'

'Is sinful, Massa Patrick livin' in you big white house,' Miss Lucy went on, lost in reverie. 'So many year me prayin' hard like Reveren' Andrew teach we, but de Massa Jesus not be hearin' dat, me spec'.'

'Of course He hears you,' Lili answered, turning to prepare a mustard plaster. 'God hears all our prayers and answers every one. I promise. Best you pray that He restore your health and make you strong again.'

The woman sighed. 'Me wan' fe be wid Massa Jesus on Him t'rone in heaven,' she replied. 'Miss Lucy tired fe all dis badness in de worl'. She wan' she freedom now fe true. She wan' fe see she mumma one more time.'

'Hush,' Lili whispered, turning, drawing back the covers, blanching at the sight of livid flesh suffused with



sweat. 'I've sent for Doctor Cooke. He'll have you right again in no time.'

Lucy sneered. 'No *buckra*-doctor come fe see poor negga since dem slavery day when Massa pay him come fe see a hundred negga. Bes' Miss Lili help dem *pickaninny* what's got plenty life inside dem still.'

She placed Miss Lucy's hand upon the mattress, grimacing to see the woman slip once more into that glassy-eyed, half conscious state brought on by the disease.

'Miss Lili?' Sybil's face appeared around the screen. 'Him here now.'

'Doctor Cooke?' She turned to Sybil, brightening with relief.

'Is not de doctor-man ... is Daniel!' Sybil whispered.

Instantly the look on Lili's face transformed to fear. 'Oh dear, I am not ready.' Trembling fingers calloused after years of unrelenting labour touched a threadbare collar.

'You wan' Sybil say him come anudder day?'

'Of course not,' Lili cried, the eagerness within her heart propelling her past vanity, around the screen, across the room and out of doors into the shade of cassia trees that grew beside the Mission. 'Daniel!'

Lili halted, knees turned weak, her heart racing wildly as the tall young man in ankle-buttoned trousers turned in her direction. Breathlessly she gazed into a paler replica of a face long hidden by the grave, the face of Bobbie Norton duplicated even to the spray of freckles that cavorted over cheekbones and across the bridge of Daniel's nose.

'You've finally come home!' She raced across the grass to fling her arms around his shoulders, hugging him with all her might to satisfy herself this was not fantasy, another one of the thousands of dreams she'd experienced through twenty years of yearning for this moment.

Muscles stiff with tension, hard and resisting, broke the spell, destroyed the ecstasy of holding him at last.

'How do you do, Miss Lili.' Daniel's voice was tight,

reserved. 'My mother asked - insisted - that I call upon you.'

Instantly she sensed that he had learned the truth. She searched wildly in her mind for words to see her through these awkward moments.

'Is Pomelia feeling better? I'd intended to return to pay another visit later on this afternoon.' Her voice was tremulous as she backed away and swallowed hard to keep the tears from flowing.

'It appears she will recover,' Daniel answered, staring hard, his gaze accusing and unrelenting, stripping back the frail facade of Lili's self-control.

'Don't look at me that way - I beg of you. I'm not your enemy!' She burst into tears, ran towards a little wooden bench beneath an orchid tree and sank into it, sobbing miserably, defeated, hopeless.

'Sorry, Miss. I did not mean ...' The voice above her halted mid-way. Fingers reached out gently, touched her shoulder.

'No, 'tis I should be apologising,' Lili whimpered, searching for a handkerchief to dab her eyes. 'I had no right, no reason to expect ...'

'You'd every right. You are my ... mother.'

Hearing this, she froze. The sound of it, that single word reverberating deep within her, filling her with such enormous guilt she'd all to do to keep from swooning, shrieking out her pain. With tentative and timid motion Lili reached to clasp the hand upon her shoulder, still not brave enough to look directly into Daniel's eyes yet needing to communicate somehow her gratitude for his acknowledgment of her.

'Your mother, yes, but in the sense that I gave birth to you. Pomelia is the one deserving of that name - or even Emily, much more than I. 'Tis they who've given everything to you.'

'Not everything ... not answers,' Daniel murmured, stepping round in front of her then squatting, gazing up into her eyes. 'I know that were it not for the gifts of food you sent up to the village we might very well have starved

when I was just a little boy. And I remember also it was you made the arrangements and provided funds that I might go to England and be educated there. The night it was decided 'twas yourself who helped Tacooma rescue me.' He paused, huge eyes beseeching, troubled. 'Why was it Pomelia and Tacooma had to live with me in hiding in the mountains? Who's to blame for stealing me away from them, imprisoning me in that cellar? Surely you must know the answers which will help me fit the puzzle of that past together.'

'To what purpose?' Lili challenged, fearful suddenly for what might happen were she to reveal their common enemy. 'I would have thought you'd be content to know the circumstances of your birth - your father's name, perhaps,' she told him, stalling, hesitating.

'Yes, of course. But there are other facts, much more than basic details of my parentage, that I must be acquainted with in order that I fully understand my childhood.' Daniel's voice was quivering. 'I beg of you, Miss Lili, if you truly care for me, you've got to tell me everything. I have the right to know. Don't you agree?'

She understood his yearning, recognised it, found it not unlike her own obsessive need to find completion as a child.

'All right then,' Lili whispered, sighing, moving to allow him space beside her on the bench. 'Sit down and I shall try to help you understand as much as possible ...'

His tolerance was barely great enough for Daniel to endure the stories of how Patrick Sloane had snatched Tacooma for a slave, how he had sent innocent Pomelia to the workhouse and how he had driven Lili and the Reverend from Bonnaire. By that time he was red-faced, quivering, beside himself with rage. Unable to contain his feelings, Daniel leaped up from the bench and ran to where his horse was tethered.

Lili begged him not to go, to wait till he was calmer, but no force on earth could have dissuaded him. He had to seek out Patrick Sloane and confront him face-to-face,

not only for the purpose of expressing outrage, indignation, but so that he might assess his adversary, take some measure of the man he was committed to destroy.

A wild, unbridled fury sent him galloping directly to the Great House at Bonnaire despite the possibility of danger that might lie in wait for him upon the enemy's terrain. Consumed with hatred, Daniel spurred his horse along the sloping drive, oblivious to workers pausing in the fields to watch his heated passage. As the mansion came into sight the memory of being kidnapped - bound and gagged in darkness - rose in his mind to press with painful force around his heart, and for an instant Daniel felt a wavering within him. Just as quickly then reality returned, restoring his resolve, reminding him two decades had elapsed. No longer was he just a boy, a slave child writhing helpless in the *buckra's* clutches. He'd become a free man with a sense of self and purpose. It was high time Massa Patrick found that out and realised he must pay for what he'd done.

The sound of hooves thundering up to the Great House brought a servant rushing out of doors.

'Where is he?' Daniel bellowed, leaping up the broad verandah steps.

The houseman seemed to cringe, to shrink into himself and creep a few steps backward. 'Massa busy in dere now. Not wan' fe no one bodderin' him.'

'I shall bother him, by God! He'll see me if I have to break down doors.'

He paused inside the entrance hall, gazed left and right with eyes aflame as he attempted to locate the source of raucous shouting muffled by closed doors. The sound enticed him up the curving staircase towards a chamber at the far end of the upper gallery. Braced for the encounter, Daniel grasped the bright brass handle, flung the portal wide.

The scene that greeted him turned Daniel's stomach, made the blood rush hot across his cheeks. Upon the huge, four-poster bed a Negro girl no more than thirteen

years old lay huddled, trying desperately to hold together remnants of a ragged dress. Huge welts across her chest and shoulders spoke with shocking eloquence of an ordeal which Daniel had mercifully interrupted.

'So! You have not lost your taste for brutalising children, I can see.'

The man who stood above her, cat in hand, dressed only in a nightshirt, whirled in the direction of the doorway.

'What in blazes ...' Patrick sputtered. 'Who are ya? How the devil ...' He spied a pistol on a chest of drawers and lunged in its direction.

Younger, faster, Daniel reached it first and grabbed the gun. The whip fell out of Patrick's hand.

'Now just a moment ...' Patrick held his palms up, smiling nervously and shrinking from the weapon pointed at his chest. 'I don't know what is on y'r mind, but there is nothin' t'be gained by aimin' that at me.'

'Twill make you listen.'

'Yes ... f'sure ... t'anything ya have t'say.' The sweat was pouring down his cheeks as Patrick backed into the bedpost, shivering, a sickly smile upon his face. 'Now what is this about?'

'First set the child free,' said Daniel. 'Then we'll speak.'

'A bit o' harmless fun.' Patrick snapped his fingers and his captive scurried from the chamber. 'Now, let us have it out and done with,' he demanded. 'Who are ya? What do ya want o'me?'

Despite the churning in his stomach, Daniel looked directly back at the eyes that glared with angry disbelief. 'I've come to warn you that you'd best be on your guard,' he growled. 'The days of tyrannising innocent Jamaicans - white and coloured - are behind you. You shall not be staying in this house which rightfully does not belong to you - and you shall cause no further damage in Green Gully.'

Patrick drew his breath in sharply. 'What, might I inquire, have my affairs t'do with ya?'

'I should not be surprised you fail to recognise me. Doubtless you have harmed so many you cannot remember each. My name is Daniel, Sir. My mother was your slave, Pomelia.'

Comprehension turned the old man's face a waxy grey. 'But that was all so long ago,' he croaked. 'I'm certain an intelligent young fellow like y'rself - a man of education, obviously - can appreciate the changes that have come about with time. There are no slaves on this plantation any longer. Every worker in the fields receives his proper wages in accordance with the law ...'

'All well and fine for you to say, Sir. But there still remains the fact that justice must be served. 'Tis my intention that you make the proper retribution for your crimes - the very least of which, I daresay, was my own abduction.'

'Is that so?' the other challenged, seeming to forget the pistol aimed in his direction. 'You must be insane t'come here, Sir. For all y'r learnin' y'have still t'recognise the differences between us. You are in Jamaica now, not in some cursed London meeting hall where abolitionists conspire t'change the proper order of society! No coloured man - however educated - can prevail against his rightful betters on this island. I should think that has been clearly proven.'

'Do not take me lightly, Sir. I do not come here making idle threats.'

'You'll make no threats at all!' Sloane shouted. 'If ya look you'll see a rifle pointing squarely at y'r bloody skull. Just one more word, another moment of y'r insolence, and I shall have ya shot as an intruder.'

Daniel glanced around and felt his legs turn wobbly at the sight of Billy Austin staring down the muzzle of a gun. At once he recognised the man who'd snatched him up that day so many years ago.

'Just drop the pistol on the floor,' said Patrick.

Daniel let the weapon fall.

'A wise decision, Sir. Now back out slowly and don't

ever let me see y'r face on Bonnaire property again.'

Daniel's hatred seemed to override his better sense. 'You'll roast in hell, Sloane! I shall see you ruined!'

'If ya do not move ya shall not live t'see tomorrow. Out, I say. Get out!'

'For now, but you've not heard the last of me!' Infuriated, Daniel turned and stormed into the gallery, fighting to withstand the men's derisive laughter and the torment of their smug expressions.

'Goodness ... all that shouting! You have certainly unnerved my grandpapa.'

He whirled, defiant, ready to defend his argument then stopped in silence, disconcerted by a pair of emerald eyes that sparkled mischief, full, pink lips turned up into a smile.

'How do you do. My name is Harriot.' The beautiful young woman glided through a bedroom doorway, hand extended, emanating fragrances of wildflowers mixed with clove. 'I could not help but overhear that "conversation". You're a very formidable man - a bit foolhardy but, I must say, quite impressive.'

Daniel watched her eyes take hasty inventory, sweeping boldly up and down the length of him.

'And you do not object,' he questioned, blinking with confusion, noting that she let her fingers rest some moments longer than was necessary in his own.

'Object?' She laughed and flung her head back, spilling waves of auburn coloured curls along her neck and shoulders. 'I should say not! High time someone had the courage to stand up to Grandpapa, no matter what the reason. Everybody hereabouts is so intimidated by the man, except for me, of course.' She linked an arm through Daniel's, grinning sideways. 'May I offer you a cup of tea, or something stronger?'

'Do you dare?' He followed amiably as she led him towards the staircase, not yet certain what to make of this unlikely personality within the Sloane encampment.

'I'm the *only* one who dares,' she boasted. 'The more

intensely Grandpapa forbids a thing, the likelier I am to do it. 'Tis all the sport that I can find to save myself from drying up with boredom in this dreary house.'

'Somehow I don't believe that,' Daniel quipped, allowing her to move ahead of him into the shade of the verandah, watching her with growing interest as she settled in a wicker chair and smoothed her skirts around her crinoline. 'I've little doubt resourceful ladies like yourself can manage suitable diversions for those hours when Grandpapa's not watching.'

Harriot returned his smile, her eyes grown brighter with pleasure in his company.

'Times like those are few and far between,' she answered. 'Grandpapa is always watching, either through his own eyes or the eyes of his informants. One is well advised to move with caution if one wishes to defy the man and live to tell the tale.'

'And what about yourself - the things that you observe? That man seems quite content to satisfy the most unspeakable, perverse desires despite your presence in the household. Frankly, I'm appalled.'

The shift of Harriot's expression mocked his innocence. 'Come come now, Sir. A grown man like yourself cannot be so naive. My grandpapa is used to doing as he pleases with the coloureds. You must understand he was accustomed to unquestioned power on this island long before the two of us were born.'

'I can't believe what I am hearing!' Daniel blurted. 'Granted, you're his kin. Still, I should think that being of another generation - close, if you'll permit me, to my own age - you would see things from a more enlightened point of view.'

'Oh, bother.' Harriot dismissed the notion with an irritated wave of fingers, an impatient sigh. 'I don't concern myself with politics or other matters best attended to by men who run the government. More suitable that ladies turn their energies towards gentler, more agreeable pursuits, don't you suppose?' The



twinkling in her eyes communicated clearly what she had in mind.

He did not choose to tell her what he thought of such insensitivity but wheeled and started for the steps.

'Where are you going ?' Harriot called after him, forehead wrinkling, lips turned petulant. 'I thought we had agreed to take a cup of tea, the better to become acquainted.'

'Possibly some other time,' said Daniel, fighting not to say a great deal more than would be sensible with Patrick Sloane and Billy Austin upstairs holding guns.

The scenery along the seaside road went unappreciated, so involved was Daniel in his visions of revenge. Miss Lili had been quite correct in warning him that Patrick Sloane was still a fierce opponent. Plain to see the man would stop at nothing to protect ill-gotten gains. No matter, Daniel thought, and turned his horse into the hollow where the Mission stood. There was no man so clever he did not possess a weak spot. Clearly now the task was to determine Patrick's, then to swoop in for the kill.

As he dismounted, Sybil rushed to greet him. 'Daniel, we been frighten' so!'

'No need to worry,' he replied. 'I daresay I have given Mister Sloane good reason to consider his behaviour carefully. Where is Miss Lili? I should like to tell her what's transpired.'

Sybil swallowed hard. 'She inside dere.'

He hurried indoors, then halted at the sight of Lili covering the body of a Negro woman with a blanket.

'One more victim of the cholera,' she whispered. 'Lucy used to be a Bonnaire slave. I've known her since I was a little girl.'

'Was there no doctor in attendance who might possibly have saved her?'

'Andrew left to fetch him, but without the necessary funds the likelihood of his success is minimal.' She

turned to face the wall, dissolving into tears of helplessness, frustration. Suddenly, the rattling of carriage wheels drew their attention out of doors. 'Perhaps that's him returning now.' She wiped her cheeks, preparing for whatever might be needed of her.

Daniel followed her and watched a sulky with two men aboard roll up before the building. First down to the ground was Andrew Baker, looking thinner, wearier for twenty years of ministry, his wheaten hair gone pearly white about the temples, yet within his hazel eyes that goodness and abiding love for mankind Daniel recollected clearly from the day the chapel had been dedicated. Just behind the Reverend was a dour looking man, mustachioed, with mutton chops, who obviously did not wish to be here.

'I have brought him!' Andrew cried.

'Too late,' said Lili, hurrying into her husband's arms, then turning towards the doctor. 'Did you not receive the letters of appeal I have been sending for the past two weeks?'

The doctor drew himself up sharply. 'See here, Missus Baker, you cannot expect me to come hurrying into the country just because a couple of your coloureds have been ailing. Were I compensated for my efforts 'twould be quite another matter. Only Reverend Baker's solemn promise that I should be paid this time has brought me here at all, I can assure you!'

Doctor Cooke's disdain, his callousness, were more than Daniel could abide.

'Would you let a woman die for lack of ready cash?' he challenged. 'How is it a man of healing can be so indifferent to the suffering of others?'

'Just a moment, my good fellow.' Doctor Cooke held up a leather case. 'The contents of this parcel have been paid for in advance. Practitioners of medicine are not to be confused with missionaries like yourself, dispensing mere quotations from the Bible ...'

'Very well then, how shall we assess the value of a

human life? In guineas! Sovereigns? Paper money suit you better?' Daniel strode up to his horse, untied the portmanteau and thrust a hand inside, emerging moments later with a fist stuffed full of bills. 'I trust there are a dozen patients in this building certainly, and many more up in the hills in danger of dying but for your expensive medicines.' He slapped the bills into the doctor's hand. 'Is this enough for you to cease your petty arguments and get about the business you were summoned for?'

'I'd no idea. Of course.' The doctor pocketed the money, turned, and hurried past the faces gaping open-mouthed at Daniel.

'Praise heaven!' Andrew cried. 'At last my pleas to London have been answered with another pastor and some aid for our impoverished mission.'

Daniel blushed. 'The doctor was mistaken. I am not a pastor. I have come here from Green Gully. I am Daniel, Sir. My mother is Pomelia. I believe the two of us were introduced when I was just a little boy.'

'Of course,' said Andrew. 'She has spoken of you often. You are always in her prayers. A dear, dear lady. How is she progressing? I would hope that your return will hasten her recovery.'

'It seems you are correct in that. And yet I cannot help but wonder what awaits her next, in fact, what all of us are destined to confront in the light of present circumstances. Is there nothing we can do?'

Andrew beamed at the younger man. 'Rarely am I privileged to meet a person so imbued with Christian decency, so filled with charity and compassion. You're an inspiration, Sir! Of course you'll stay to supper. We have many things to speak about and I should like to know you better.'

Daniel tensed, glanced nervously at Lili. 'I had not intended to intrude ...'

'My husband is correct.' Her eyes were bright with pleasure and with pride. 'Young men of principle are few

and far between - especially upon this island. Supper will be simple, Daniel, but we would consider it an honour if you'd join us.'

At the table, Daniel listened to a full account of what had happened in Jamaica through two decades of his absence. With a growing sense of dread he heard the Reverend, Lili and Sybil tell of how emancipation had imposed upon the Negroes hardship equal to and sometimes greater than the bondage they had known as slaves. He heard the miserable conditions of the hired workers forced to live ten to a room in bug infested huts; the taxes and restrictions placed upon the independent Negro farmers by a legislature dedicated to excluding former slaves from voting; lack of education, medical attention and, as a result of these atrocities, the violent hatred rampant still between the races.

'Is a sin how Massa do de negga all dese year since mumma an' Miss Pommie dere in Oxford Hall, an' no one strong fe stop him,' Sybil was lamenting. 'All de people knows de one what's bringin' badness.'

Daniel turned to Andrew for elaboration.

'It is true,' the Reverend told him. 'Mister Sloane controls all commerce hereabouts. His vile influence extends to merchant houses and trading ships. I daresay he has even got the Kingston bankers in his grasp. There's no one in this parish earns a decent living but for Patrick Sloane's indulgence. He's the only one who prospers at a time when vast estates are being left abandoned for the lack of funds to operate them.'

'What about the other planters? How can he control their actions? Surely it would be to their advantage to maintain agreeable relations with the workers who must tend their fields.'

'A simple matter when you hold their notes of mortgage,' Lili interjected bitterly. 'The very means by which he stole Bonnaire. It has been twenty years and still the planters of Trelawny are quite deeply in his debt. 'Tis how he keeps these men from selling land to Negro

farmers, and from offering a higher wage than he, himself, will part with. They have barely got enough to pay the interest due him every year. And naturally, he sees to it the ablest workers are directed to his own estates.'

'We have to stop him!' Daniel's fist crashed down upon the table.

'Yes, of course. But how?' said Andrew. 'Thirty years I am in residence upon this island and not once in all that time has anyone successfully opposed the man, except, of course, for Charles.' He turned to Lili, smiling sadly.

Daniel saw the colour drain out of her cheeks and felt the need to rescue her although he did not understand her torment. 'We shall come upon a way, but now I think it best that I be leaving,' he announced and pushed his chair back from the table.

'Very well.' The Reverend rose and reached for Daniel's hand. 'It's been a most informative and pleasurable evening, even though we have not found the means by which to topple Mister Sloane.'

'Make no mistake about it, we shall bring him down. I am determined, more than ever now.'

'You know you have our blessing,' Lili said as she moved round to kiss his cheek.

'I'm sure that I shall need it,' Daniel whispered. 'More than either of us can imagine.'

Daniel's head was aching as he rode with Sybil to the village. All at once the forces of his life had come together to erupt in turmoil. He was duty-bound to champion the cause of those unable to defend themselves, to best the enemy of those he loved. Inside himself a voice demanded that he turn and run while life and limb were still intact. And yet he knew this was unthinkable, for even as he yearned for safety, there was no forgetting that but for the very people he was going to protect he, too, might be in their predicament, or even worse.

'You quiet all de way back from de Mission,' Sybil

whispered as he helped her to the ground. 'Dis day bring Daniel plenty ting fe wonderin', yes?'

Daniel nodded. 'There has got to be a way to save the people of Green Gully and to return Bonnaire to Reverend Baker and Miss Lili. Someone has to put a stop to what's been going on.'

'Is Daniel, sure, can do de ting.'

'But it is such an awesome task for just one man, alone.'

'You not alone,' she murmured, reaching out to touch his shoulder. 'Daniel got so many people lovin' him - Pomelia an' Tacooma, Reveren' Andrew an' Miss Lili, Sybil, if he wan' ...'

He stared at her and for the first time saw beyond his own concerns: the sparkling eyes that gazed with adoration, lips that quivered, waiting, eager. 'Do you really mean that?' he exclaimed and reached to take her hands.

She grinned at him with absolute conviction. 'Sybil knows dat when she watch you firs' time wid Pomelia. All dese year me hear you such a special fella, den me see you an' fe sure dat so.'

He could not speak, could not express in words the depth of feeling he experienced to realise she had put her trust, her future totally into his keeping. Overwhelmed by his desire, he gathered Sybil in his arms and let his kisses speak of first love, strong and true.

It had been no simple undertaking to rebuild the village, but as weeks stretched into months the fruits of dedicated and unceasing labour were apparent. Once again the little cottages stood proudly on their hillsides. Fields were green; young shoots of cane, pimento, arrowroot, proliferated in the sun. And best of all, thought Daniel, as he gazed along the river bank where women knelt to wash their clothes and draw their drinking water, the enthusiasm of the people had been reawakened, fortified anew with hope and optimism.

That he'd been the one primarily responsible was not the posturing of brash conceit, but the consensus of the people in Green Gully who had come to know him and revere him as a man of generosity, a leader. It was Daniel who'd arranged for Doctor Cooke to visit monthly and whose gold and ingenuity secured materials, in secret, for the reconstruction of their houses. Half the money he had brought from England had been spent in these pursuits, but Daniel did not mind. This was his way of sharing the responsibility, participating fully in the gamble he had undertaken on the villagers' behalf - a gamble he had not revealed to anyone but Sybil.

From the midst of these reflections Daniel heard her calling out his name. By now he knew her well enough to recognise the shadings of her voice and whirled, his pulses racing, hardly daring to believe what intuition told him.

She was running down the hillside, waving something in her hand. 'Is here!' she cried. 'You letter come from Englan'!'

Daniel raced to meet her halfway, snatched the envelope and tore it open.

'What him say? What Uncle Avery tell you?'

With a whoop of victory he leaped into the air, unable to contain his pleasure.

'The answer is most emphatic and enthusiastic . . . yes!' he cried, already running towards the pasture where the mules and horses grazed.

'Now where you goin'?' Sybil called out after him.

'To tell Miss Lili and the Reverend, naturally!'

The sweat was pouring down his face as Daniel raced his stallion towards the Mission grounds. A hundred times in fantasy had he arrived triumphant to announce success to Andrew and Miss Lili. Finally, it was no longer necessary to imagine their reactions or to keep his plan a secret. It was settled and arranged. His vision was to be a reality.

A dozen carriages tied up before the rectory obstructed the entrance. Puzzled, Daniel swung down from the saddle and approached the building's side door. Voices from the parlour, the aroma of tobacco, stopped him in the ante-room. This was no bible class, no mathematics lesson. Suddenly self-conscious, Daniel pulled his hat off, straightened his lapels and stepped into the other chamber.

Grey depression blanketed the atmosphere as thickly as cigar smoke curling through the air. Men with tight expressions slumped in wooden chairs and leaned dejectedly against the walls, attention suddenly diverted from Miss Lili at their centre to the new arrival.

'Daniel - what an unexpected pleasure!' Lili moved to take him by the hand and draw him in among the others. 'These are friends of mine, most loyal and appreciated comrades. Mister Taylor, Mister Rainsford - everybody - I should like for you to meet a young Jamaican recently returned from an extended stay in England.'

Daniel greeted each in turn, aware as Lili introduced



him round the room that she, as well, was caught up in their tension and discomfort.

'I am sorry you could not have come upon us under happier conditions,' Lili told him as she poured a cup of tea and motioned Daniel to a seat beside her own. 'In truth we are confronted by a most distressing set of circumstances.'

'That we are,' said Mister Taylor, sighing. 'It appears - despite these many years of striving - that the time has come to yield to the inevitable and place our properties for sale at auction ...'

'... which, in fact, is to surrender them to Patrick Sloane,' said Mister Rainsford, scowling at the thought.

'Indeed, this is a grave decision,' Daniel answered. 'Might I ask the reason?'

'There are many reasons,' Mister Taylor answered, 'but most urgent of them all is that we've not sufficient workers to produce a decent crop ...'

'Forgive me,' Daniel interrupted. 'I was under the impression there are many Negroes desperately in need of such employment.'

'Yes, of course. But precious few will work for wages we can pay.'

'Is there no means of raising salaries?'

'None at all, so long as Mister Sloane is watching. He would do us in for sure were we to go against his wishes.'

'Does he hold so tight a rein upon you?'

Discontented grumblings filled the room.

'For all intents and purposes he owns us, every one,' said Mister Burke, thick eyebrows bunching close together. 'All of our plantations have been mortgaged to the man. Were we to miss a payment he could have our lands in forfeit.'

'Which is just what he's been waiting for,' snapped Pye.

'The way he took Bonnaire,' said Lili with remorse.

'Can you not sell your lands, perhaps? Divide them into ten or twenty acre parcels to be purchased by Free Coloureds?'

'Were that possible we would have done so long ago!' said Mister Taylor, glancing guiltily at Lili. 'Sad to say the man has prior claim, preventing this.'

'Unless, of course, there were some other person who might wish to purchase one of our estates entirely,' said Mister Burke. 'All monies due him on the property would still be paid to Mister Sloane, but once that debt had been discharged he'd have no further claim. At least a single holding would escape his clutches.'

'Which is why we've come to you, Miss Lili,' Pye concluded, seconded by murmurs of assent from all the others. 'In consideration of our past, unfortunate collaboration, we are all of the opinion that yourself and Reverend Baker should be given first priority to purchase any pen or sugar cane plantation you've a mind to own - the price to equal its indebtedness to Patrick Sloane and not a penny more.'

'Dear friends, I'm overwhelmed,' said Lili.

'It is only right,' insisted Gideon. 'Twas Sloane who forced us into selling him your notes. This is the least that we can do.'

'But even so, the Reverend and myself are not in a position to accept your generosity. As much as I would love to hamper Mister Sloane in his attempts to rule our little parish ...'

Lili's final words were lost beneath the disappointed groans and grumblings of the others.

'So - 'tis settled then,' said Taylor. 'There's no choice but to concede defeat.'

'Not necessarily.' This, out of Daniel's lips, turned every head in his direction. 'What I mean to say is that there may be an alternative - if you are willing to consider action which might be a bit out of the ordinary.'

To a man they melted back into their places, waiting, eager.

'I have here in my possession a communication just arrived from England,' Daniel pulled the letter from his pocket. 'That it comes on this particular occasion seems especially fortuitous as it is from a man who owns a fleet

of sailing ships and who advises me that he will be delighted to transport out of Montego Bay as many hogsheads filled with sugar and whatever else I'm able to provide him with.' Grinning slyly, Daniel turned to Lili. 'Tis none other than your Uncle Avery.'

'Uncle Avery?' Lili echoed. 'How did he ...'

'I wrote to him some months ago with this suggestion. At the time 'twas my intention to provide the people of Green Gully with a means of export for their sugar, independent of the merchant houses hereabouts controlled by Mister Sloane.'

'A marvellous idea,' she answered. 'Still, I'm at a loss to understand the relevance of this to what we've been discussing.'

Daniel turned again to face the others. 'Gentlemen, this is a perfect opportunity to rid yourselves of Patrick Sloane's control upon your lives. Were you to join together with the people of Green Gully to produce your crops and sell them independently, he would no longer have you at his mercy.'

'I can understand the premise and it is a valid one,' said Gideon. 'But I'm afraid this comes too late to be of any use. As we are speaking, half our fields lie fallow, wasted for the lack of able hands.'

'My point exactly,' Daniel answered. 'To assure your own survival every acre must be planted.'

'But we do not have the necessary capital for this endeavour.'

'And if ready cash were not required?'

'I do not understand,' said Rainsford. 'What inducement could there be, if not a steady wage, to set Free Coloureds working?'

'Land!' cried Daniel. 'The very land you are unable to make use of under present circumstances could be offered in exchange for labour. Certainly, a man will work for very little if he knows that once a specified amount of time has passed he is assured of his reward. Divide your profits when the fields are harvested, exchange a fair percentage of them for a season's toil. Then sell a portion

of your land to those who hunger for a freehold of their own.'

'The land's not ours to sell!'

'It would be were it unencumbered. With the money you'd receive were every acre cultivated you could liquidate your debts and then proceed according to your own desires.'

The impact of his vision set the others to excited whisperings.

'Undoubtedly this plan would loose the wrath of Patrick Sloane upon us,' Mister Rainsford stated, thoughtful, hesitant.

'What of it?' Daniel challenged. 'You've already told me you will lose your lands if circumstances are not changed.'

'He's absolutely right,' cried Gideon. 'We've nothing more to risk by working in co-operation with the Negroes.'

'How can we be sure of their participation?' Mister Rainsford countered.

'I shall see to it, and gladly,' Daniel promised. 'The people of Green Gully have already trusted me in other matters and will heed my counsel once again. Were I to guarantee them that a portion of your lands will be available for purchase after sugaring is done, I'm certain you will have more workers in your fields than you have seen since slavery days. Decide among yourselves, my friends. How many acres do you have among you? Tally up your needs and leave the rest to me!'

As pandemonium erupted trembling fingers tugged at Daniel's jacket. Turning, he observed Miss Lili looking pale and motioning him towards a corner.

'Have you lost your senses? Lili whispered when they stood alone. 'There cannot be more than two hundred able bodied workers in the village. How do you expect to keep such promises?'

'I don't intend to limit my endeavours to recruiting workers from Green Gully,' Daniel told her. 'Don't you

see it? Now there is a way to free the Negroes at Bonnaire and ruin Mister Sloane entirely.'

'You can't be serious,' she rasped clutching his forearm. 'Patrick Sloane will have your hide for this!'

He winked and patted her upon the hand. 'The only thing that Mister Sloane will have when I am finished are plantations standing idle - and I daresay under such conditions even he will not be able to endure!'

With that he slipped her arm through his and led her back into the midst of twenty planters begging to accept his offer.

Daniel squinted through the light of kerosene lamps towards the elders of the village clustered in a corner of the cottage, speculating, arguing the merits of his plan. Excited voices echoed in the rafters, bounced along the wooden walls. If only he could understand them, Daniel thought, resenting that they slipped into the language of the Old Land when debating matters of importance. What could make them hesitate? Was it not obvious that his proposal would be best for all?

At last discussion tapered off and once again he found himself the centre of attention. Trembling with anticipation, Daniel waited, breathless as they turned in his direction and Tacooma motioned him into their midst.

'Is dangerous - too dangerous.' Pomelia was the first to break the silence, chosen as their spokesman for her close relationship with Daniel. 'Not be safe fe Daniel go down in Bonnaire fe steal away dem negga what belong to Massa Patrick.'

'They do not belong to him! The workers at Bonnaire are free men, just the same as you and I. Have you forgotten what it means to live beneath his domination - to be terrified of Mister Sloane at every moment, fearful for your very lives?'

'Is jus' how we be sayin' now,' Tacooma answered. 'Massa not be foolish so to let dem negga pull-foot from dat place. Is plenty men wid gun what stay up all de

night fe watchin'. Daniel never do de ting so no one catch him - dat fe sure.'

'And what about yourself?' he blurted. 'And Miss Juliett?' He turned to her. 'And mumma, you as well? Has each of you not managed to escape from him at one time or another? Why should I not fare as well?' He saw their gazes drop before his own. 'Or is there something else - another reason you're not telling me?'

'Fe sure dey worryin' about you,' Sybil whispered, sensing Daniel's anger rising, fearful that at any moment it might burst out of control.

Pomelia swallowed hard and pulled herself onto her feet. 'You right in what you tinkin'. Dere be udder reason,' she announced. 'Is many here what's sayin' dat Green Gully people differen' from dem negga work fe *buckra*-man. Dis village, it belong to us. We gots de paper on de land. Nobody here go down fe help dem *buckra*-man what keep we slave so long.'

'I don't believe what I am hearing!' Daniel thundered. 'Would you turn your backs upon your brothers at Bonnaire?' He glared at them, then fixed upon Tacooma. 'When I was a little boy you told me stories of Ashanti Town - how you led slaves out of Bonnaire and helped those Guinea-men escape a ship that brought them here from Africa. Don't you remember how you chose to risk your lives instead of yielding to your bondage? Has this freedom softened you, or blinded you completely to the plight of others?'

'Dey still be plantation negga. We be free men!' someone shouted.

'Free of what?' he yelled at them. 'Not prejudice, assuredly. You are behaving just as Patrick Sloane would have it. You are turning from your people and refusing them your help. Such action only weakens the position of the black man. We must pull together every way we can to raise ourselves up from the horrors of the past or we shall always be fair game for men like Patrick Sloane to prey upon!'

He jumped to his feet and stormed towards the doorway. 'I suggest you reconsider this decision not to help the people from Bonnaire and work beside them for those planters who've agreed to sell a portion of their lands. Remember that you hurt yourselves as well, for as your children shall continue to be born here in Green Gully there will be more mouths to feed. 'Twill not be long before your fields and pastures are no longer adequate to meet the need. What will you do then when you find that Patrick Sloane and those who follow him own every acre in Trelawny, and you have only two choices left: to work for them, or starve!' Exasperated, Daniel whirled and left the building.

Sybil found him minutes later. Softly, silently, she reached to take his hand. 'You say dem strong inside dere, make dem look on dis again.'

'No doubt they shall discuss it endlessly,' he growled. 'The elders are adept at conversation. Would they were so expert in transforming useless talk to action.'

'Dey sen' Sybil out fe say you do de ting.'

'In truth?' he cried. 'They've changed their minds? I don't believe it!'

Sybil nodded, joy and pride and love for Daniel gleaming in her eyes. 'Dey say you bring dem people here an' dey be welcome. If you wan' dey give you men wid gun fe helpin' ...'

'No, I have to go alone,' he interrupted, thoughts already racing far ahead, envisioning the task. 'I cannot take the chance of causing a disturbance, having people shoot at one another. I shall lead the workers here myself.'

She gazed with apprehension into Daniel's eyes. 'Is true dem ting dey say 'bout danger? 'Bout dem men dat's watchin' at Bonnaire?'

'Yes, it is true,' he answered. 'Doubtless Patrick Sloane has guards and spies about.'

'Den how you manage? How you go inside dat place widdout dem seein?'

Daniel saw the terror in her eyes and turned away. 'I cannot tell you,' he replied, and hurried off into the darkness.

Byron Hall, the largest sugar cane estate in all Trelawny, stood in regal splendour in the middle of a broad savannah high above the sea. In every window crystal chandeliers were glistening and a quarter mile distant near its huge, imposing gates the lilt of violins and merry laughter floated on the evening breeze, attesting to the fact that the reception for Sir Henry Barkly, Governor, was happily in progress.

Hidden in the shadows, Daniel had been waiting, watching, biding time. Across the road, concealed among the branches of a Barringtonia, he'd seen the carriages arrive - one hundred of Jamaica's white elite invited for a lavish meal and dancing. One by one the coachmen halted at the gate and shouted to a guard positioned there, revealing the identity of those within each vehicle. When Patrick Sloane and Harriot had been announced, he'd taken careful notice of their driver, memorised his features. Then he'd settled back to let the hours pass until his intuition told him that the proper moment had arrived.

Proceeding soundlessly he shimmied down the tree trunk, doubled back through thickly wooded land and stepped into a clearing where Miss Lili's carriage had been hidden. Brushing knees and elbows of a scarlet livery borrowed for the evening, Daniel climbed into the driver's seat, resolving not to think about the repercussions should this undertaking fail.

'Who goes there?' cried a military officer, his rifle drawn as Daniel reined the pair of sorrels up before the gateposts.

'Quashee - Jack, Sah. Come here from Bonnaire t'fetch de Missy Harriot. She fadder, Massa Patrick Sloane, sen' word dat lady feelin' poorly - needs fe gettin' home in bed.'

The soldier propped his gun against a wheel and held



a piece of paper up beside the carriage lamp. 'What did you say those names were?'

'Patrick Sloane, Sah, an' him daughter, Harriot.'

'Yes, yes - I see it here. Pass through.' The guard stepped back and waved the carriage onward.

Daniel's teeth were chattering as he approached the roundabout before the mansion. Fending off the urge to turn and run he steered the carriage to an empty place and hopped down to the ground.

Crouched out of sight he made his way among the gleaming black barouches towards a group of coachmen and postilions gathered near the stables. Aided by the moonlight, Daniel found the one he had been searching for then noticed with delight that several flasks were being passed around. Perhaps this would be easier than he'd expected, Daniel thought as he sidled towards the edges of the group.

It was a simple task to camouflage himself among the others. Laughing, joking, flawlessly affecting his Jamaican dialect from childhood, Daniel mingled with the servants, inching purposefully towards his quarry till he stood beside the white-haired driver he had noticed at the gate.

'Dis night be long fe waitin',' Daniel offered casually.

The other man sighed wearily and nodded. 'All me life me waitin' on dem *buckra*.'

Daniel leaned a little closer, smiling slyly. 'Wan' you take a spliff wid me fe make de time pass merry?'

Weary eyes turned bright with eagerness. 'You got dat here?'

'Jus' some fe two.' He nodded towards the stables. 'Step wid me aroun' de udder side. We smoke it dere.' He backed away and sauntered towards the building, satisfied to hear the sound of footsteps close behind.

A single lantern hung above the entrance. Daniel took it from its hook and led the way into an empty stall where bales of guinea-grass provided seating.

'You not comin' from no Great House in Trelawny,' said the older man, observing Daniel's threadbare jacket,

wrinkled pants too short about the ankles. 'Who you bringin' in dis place?'

Daniel drew a cone of ganja leaves out of his pocket, placed it in between his lips and lit a match. 'Me comin' here from Spanish Town.' He puffed the hemp to life and handed it across. 'Is hard fe negga dere fin' work what's regular. Tonight de firs' me drive a carriage. Wear dem trouser from me brudder. Gots no need fe fancy clothes dem year me workin' in de field.'

The other man inhaled deeply, nodding with commiseration. 'Cyrus hate dem fancy jacket too - dem collar squeeze de neck.' He took another puff and opened up the topmost button of his shirt. 'Too old fe pullin' up dem weed an' cuttin' down de cane now,' he continued sadly. 'Gots to drive de Massa. Wash him horse an' carriage or me be no use at all.'

'No use - no money,' Daniel said, pretending to reflect aloud, alert for eyelids growing heavier, the tight set of a jawline slackening. 'Is hard fe make a penny in dis *buckra*-country.'

'Dat fe true,' the other answered, drawing loudly on the cigarette then leaning back against the wood partition, eyes closed, smoke held deeply in his lungs.

'Sometime is udder way fe dem what's quick to see it,' Daniel said offhandedly, observing the effects of the intoxicant, deciding that the time had come to set the mood. 'A chance fe have a little money when de negga smart an' no be sayin' how de dollar come.'

The older man gazed drowsily through pungent smelling clouds of smoke. 'What kin' o' ting you speakin' on? You knows a way?'

'Me knows a *buckra*-man got plenty money, spend it sure fe gettin' what him wan'.'

'An' what dat be?'

'Me not so quick fe sayin'. No one s'pose to know de ting me come fe doin' in dis place.'

Enthralled, the other man leaned forward, eyes turned glassy, red-rimmed from the smoke. 'Me not say nothin'. Me de one fe keepin' still. You gots a ting fe doin' in dis

parish, Cyrus good fe helpin'. Him knows everyting an' everybody. Cyrus livin' in Trelawny since him *pickaninny*. Ask!

Pretending scepticism, Daniel took a puff without inhaling. 'Cyrus knows a lady call Miss Harriot? De daughter of a *buckra*-massa name of Patrick Sloane?'

'Fe sure, fe sure! She be de lady same drivin' here dis night!'

'Is someone wan' fe make a meetin' wid she - wan' fe Missy know him waitin' down de road.' Daniel reached into his pocket, lifted out a pile of silver coins. 'Him say me if dere be a way fe tellin' she, dis money fe de man can do it.'

Cyrus threw his head back, bursting into laughter. 'Sure Miss Harriot be foolin' wid some fancy *buckra* gots a wife an' *pickaninny*, yes?' The laughter halted suddenly. 'Big trouble if she tata knows.'

'Is no one gots to know but you an' me,' said Daniel. 'Easy ting fe Cyrus go up in dat house now, fin' de lady, say de message.'

'What dat message be?' The older man was staring at the coins.

'You gots to say she dere's a carriage come an' Daniel waitin'.'

'Daniel?'

'She know what dat mean.' He winked. 'Me come fe take dat lady udder time.'

'How much dat money Cyrus get fe doin' such?'

'Him gets it all,' said Daniel, drawing back abruptly. 'When him brings de lady out.' He thrust the silver back into his pocket.

Cyrus nodded. 'Wan' you dat me bring de missy here?'

'You bring dat lady near a carriage what me show you,' Daniel answered, rising to his feet and beckoning the other man in the direction of the stable doors.

The minutes felt like hours as he paced beside the carriage. Would Miss Harriot remember? Would she take the chance and come to see him or had she lost interest by this time - found someone else with whom to pass the

idle hours? Rivulets of perspiration trickled down his sides, between his shoulder blades. Perhaps he'd gone too far, assumed too much, extended his endeavours past the realm of possibility ...

And then he saw her, radiant in folds in cinnamon and green as she swept down the wide verandah steps with Cyrus at her side.

'I thought it might be you. Of all the nerve!' A glitter of arousal in her eyes belied the tone of indignation. 'What on earth could have possessed you ...'

Daniel held his hand up, gesturing for caution. 'Just a moment please.' He scooped the coins out of his pocket, handed them to Cyprus, waited till the driver hurried out of sight. 'Now we may speak.'

'You know you could be hanged for this!'

'Indeed,' he answered, grinning boldly. 'But 'twas you yourself who said one has to move with utmost care in order to oppose the will of Patrick Sloane.'

She giggled. 'What was it you had in mind?' The voice was softer, huskier.

'Just this ...'

Before the woman knew what happened Daniel's mouth pressed fiercely to her own. At first she struggled in his arms, but as his tongue slipped in between her lips he felt resistance leave her body, heard the rumbling of arousal in her throat and Harriot yielded, melted to him, pressed her body tight against his own.

'We mustn't ... this is far too dangerous,' she murmured when their lips had parted.

'Yes, I know - 'tis why I've brought a carriage,' Daniel answered, reaching for the door.

'Indeed?' Her eyes flashed fire. 'Do you think that I'd be willing ...'

'No, of course not. 'Tis the means for us to go off someplace by ourselves while Mister Sloane is occupied - that is, unless I underestimated someone's bravery when last we spoke.' He winked, defying her to disagree.

She looked him up and down as though attempting to decide, then smiled coquettishly. 'You are astounding,

Daniel, but I do admire a man with courage. Shall we drive back to Bonnaire?

'Exactly what I had in mind,' he answered truthfully, aware that once he'd left her bed he could proceed unnoticed to the houses where the workers lived, on this, the first of several nights when he would lead them to Green Gully, ten or twenty at a time.

## 34

'What d'ya mean, they've gone?' The trumpeting of Patrick's fury filled the morning room. 'Two hundred niggers simply do not disappear within a fortnight!'

Billy Austin winced. 'No doubt there's somethin' underhanded goin' on. The mill's deserted too. We had t'shut the fires down.'

'I shall be ruined!' Patrick raged. "'Tis hard enough t'see a crop through droughts and hurricanes - now this!' He paused, reflecting darkly. 'D'ya think we have the makin's of another insurrection in our midst?'

'Not likely.' Billy shook his head. 'We would've got word about it from the other planters.'

'You've a point there,' Patrick murmured thoughtfully. 'If Burke or Taylor woke t'find their workers gone, no doubt by now they would've banged m'doors down, beggin' me t'help. Y'don't suppose that my plantations are the only ones affected in this manner, do ya?'

'Hard t'say, Sir. Truth t'tell I ain't had time t'make the rounds and ask.'

'Then we shall do so now this minute!' Patrick smacked his cane against the floor. 'Go quickly. Fetch a carriage. We shall soon discover what is happenin'!'

No sooner had his sulky rolled onto the grounds of

Taylor Pen than Patrick had his answer. Turning left and right he glanced at sprouting fields of Bourbon cane and ginger stretching into the distance, tended by at least a hundred workers bent among the rows. 'So this is where those devils are,' he growled at Billy. 'Gideon had better say his prayers afore I get m'hands upon 'im!'

As he spoke the man appeared upon the porch, fresh dressed in crisp white trousers, shirt and matching waistcoat, puffing on a thick cigar. Incensed by Gideon's demeanour, Patrick flicked the reins until the horses brought him close enough to shout, 'I am surprised t'see that you are not at work upon y'r land this mornin'!'

'There's no need. The coloureds have been tending to my fields quite nicely, thank you.'

Patrick bristled. 'Doubtless y're referrin' t'the workers stolen from me own plantation.'

'Stolen?' Daniel stepped out through the doorway. 'Do those men belong to you, Sir? I was under the impression they were free.'

'Tis you! I might have known!' Infuriated, Patrick climbed down from the carriage. 'Gideon, I'd have a word with ya in private.'

'I can see no need for that,' the man responded. 'Anything you have to tell me may be said before my friend.'

'Your friend indeed! This man's a criminal! Somehow he's managed to abscond with nearly every nigger at Bonnaire ...'

'... and Oxford Hall and Allamanda Hall as well, in case you haven't noticed,' Daniel added. 'But of course there is no law against free people choosing where they wish to labour.'

Patrick drove his cane into the earth. 'Fair warnin', Gideon: return m'workers by tomorrow or I'll have y'r lands in forfeit!'

'No you won't. You've got your interest. There's no money due you till the first of June.'

'Then that is when I shall foreclose! You'll have t'come across with every penny that y'owe me.'

'Gladly,' Gideon responded, unimpressed. 'The interest *and* the principal. In full. But till that date, Sir, we've no further business. You are trespassing upon my property. Good day to you.' He turned his back and walked into the house with Daniel following.

'Ungrateful bastard,' Patrick growled, his face flushed pink with fury as he hauled himself back up into the carriage. 'After all the years I've subsidised his miserable existence. I shall ruin him!'

'And what about the others?' Billy mumbled, looking grim. 'If Taylor's taken in y'r workers, safe t'say his friends have done the same. There's Pye and Burke and Rainsford ...'

'D'ya think that *all* of 'em ...'

''Tis likely - thanks t'that one, Daniel. Wish I'd shot 'is troublesome head off when we had 'im at Bonnaire.'

'No matter,' Patrick snapped as Billy took the reins. 'We shall destroy him yet. But this time, I'd advise ya not t'fail.'

The other's face turned ashen. 'What are y'expectin' of me?'

'Information,' Patrick snarled. 'Somehow, some way, the man came back and talked m'coloureds into leavin'. Don't know how he managed it but I intend t'learn, by God! And you're the one who'll tell me.'

'How am I t'find that out?' The overseer's voice was thin and quivering with trepidation.

'Any way y'have to!' Patrick bellowed. 'Crack some woolly heads if necessary - use y'r whip. It doesn't matter. Just so long as I've an answer. That is, if y'wish t'keep a roof above y'r head!'

Two weeks gone by and still no word.

Patrick spat a piece of mango in his napkin, flung it down and pushed his chair back from the table. There was no enjoyment to be found in food. Indeed, all earthly pleasures seemed to have been stripped of their appeal and life was bitter, thanks to one detestable young halfbreed. Fifty years of skilful planning, sharp ma-

noeuving, destroyed before his very eyes. 'Damnation!' Patrick cried and hurled a fork across the room. No mongrel bastard was about to undermine his empire. Not without a fight. He'd see that nigger burn in hell before he yielded.

'Mister Sloane!'

The sound of Billy calling from the front verandah startled Patrick back into the moment. Wincing at the pain, he pulled a bandaged foot out of a tub beside his chair and hobbled towards the door.

'I've got 'im here! We've found the culprit!'

Propped against the doorframe, Patrick leered at Billy Austin dragging Cyrus up the steps. The coloured man was babbling incoherently, tears streaming down his wrinkled face along with blood that trickled from his nose; the evidence, undoubtedly, of Billy Austin's beating.

'And what is this about now?' Patrick snarled. 'What makes ya think this man had anything t'do with it?'

'I don't suspect - I've brought the evidence!' The overseer shoved the Negro forward, sending Cyrus to his knees. 'Just have a look at this,' he cried, and reached into his pocket.

Patrick's eyes grew wider as the overseer dumped a pouch of silver coins upon the floorboards.

'Found 'em underneath 'is bed when I was searchin' through the coloured quarters.'

Patrick nodded, crossed his arms and glared at Cyrus. 'Well?'

'Oh no, Sah. Cyrus not do nothin' bad!' The Negro drew a sleeve across his nose to wipe the blood.

'Like hell ya didn't!' Billy's boot struck fiercely at the old man's ribs. 'You tell the Master 'bout Miss Harriot. Go on!'

'Me only say a message,' Cyrus wailed. 'Not steal dem workers from Bonnaire.'

'What message?' Patrick barked, his interest growing. Cyrus shuddered, fought to form the words. 'Dat night we dere in Byron Hall a *mustee* fella come wid all dis



money. Say me tell de missy someone waitin', wan' fe see her down de road.'

'Another of her paramours, no doubt,' said Patrick, sorely disappointed, scowling with impatience at the overseer. 'What has this t'do with disappearin' niggers?'

Billy's answer was an open-handed blow across the Negro's face. 'The name!' he yelled at Cyrus. 'Say the name to Mister Sloane!'

'Is not de one she meet. Jus' him what bring de carriage.'

'Say it!' Billy shouted.

'Name be Daniel, Sah - dat *mustee* fella come from Spanish Town.'

'From Spanish Town, eh?' Billy turned to Patrick, grinning in jubilation. 'He put Miss Harriot into a carriage and they drove away. If you'll forgive me, Sir, my guess is that the lady brought him back to this estate. Of course, she had no way of knowin', once he'd finished with 'er ...'

'That's enough! No need t'say it. I can well imagine what went on.'

'Please, Massa - not be vex wid Cyrus. Him you negga all dese year, plant Massa's field, drive Massa's slave, bring Massa's carriage ...'

'Ought t'blow y'r bloody head off!' Patrick barked. 'F'r just a bit o'silver you have nearly brought me ruin!'

'Massa take de money den. Ol' Cyrus no wan' nothin' bring dis trouble.' Whimpering, he crawled to gather up the coins and place them next to Patrick's feet. 'Me gets more money fe de Massa, all dem penny what me wife an datter bring fe sellin' pigeon in de market ...' The appearance of a pistol silenced him.

'Perhaps I'll kill you,' Patrick taunted.

'Massa, no! Me beggin'!' Cyrus flung himself onto his stomach, fingers interlaced behind his skull.

The heel of Patrick's shoe dug mercilessly into the old man's neck. 'If you've a wish t'live you'll have t'prove y'rself t'me - undo the damage that you've done.' He glanced at Billy, winked an eye.

'Yes, Massa. *Anyting!*' the Negro whimpered. 'What you wan' from Cyrus?'

'Facts about this Daniel person. Details of his life. Where does he live? Who is it he conspires with? How many are in league with him?'

'Is no way Cyrus fin' dem ting, Sah. Dat man gone in Spanish Town fe sure!'

'A fabrication!' Patrick cried. 'No doubt he's living in Green Gully with those other blasted niggers who imagine they're as good as whites. 'Tis you can move among them undetected, Cyrus. Sneak into that village, look around, report t'me.'

'Dey fin' out what me doin', Sah, dey kills me sure!'

'A chance you'll have t'take,' said Patrick, fondling his pistol. 'Y'can die right here an' now, or do as I've instructed.'

Eyes fixed fearfully upon the gun, the Negro struggled to his knees and nodded slowly. 'Yes, Sah. Cyrus goin', Sah.'

'That's better,' Patrick answered, satisfied. 'Afore ya do, though, there's another thing that I would say t'ya.' He squatted to collect the coins, faced Cyrus eye-to-eye. 'Should y'be of the notion y'can leave this place and not return, I would advise ya t'remember that y'r wife an' girl will be remainin' here, and if y'think that Mister Austin has been rough upon ya, be assured 'tis child'splay in comparison with what I've seen 'im do t'women!'

'A moment, Harriot. I'd have a word with ya!' The old man's anger thundered from the library.

Her footsteps halted, turned and backtracked to the open doorway. 'Grandpapa, good morning! Do forgive my not appearing at the breakfast table, but it seems I've overslept.'

'No doubt.' He eyed her coldly with contempt. 'And where might ya be off to now in such a blasted hurry?'

'Why to Falmouth, certainly, to have a fitting for my gown.' She contemplated him a moment then relaxed. 'Poor Grandpapa. Your foot is aching terribly this

morning, yes? No wonder you are so disgruntled.'

Patrick glared at her, unmoved, suspicious. 'You would not be rushin' off t'meet a certain person name of Daniel, would ya?'

'Grandpapa, what can you possibly be thinking of? Where do you get these notions?' Harriot began to edge away. 'We'll talk at dinner, yes? A nice long chat ...'

'You'll stay right here till I am finished with ya, Missy. I forbid ya t'set foot beyond the gates.'

The last of her conviviality dissolved. 'I'm sorry, Grandpapa, I'm not your prisoner. You shall not tell me when to come and go. For heaven's sake, the blackies have more freedom!'

'You've abused y'r freedom. One would think you'd have enough discretion t'remain among y'r own kind. What could have possessed ya t'become associated with a coloured man - t'bring him here into this house?'

Her cheeks began to pale. 'A mere amusement, Grandpapa. No cause for such excitement. And besides, since when have you become so interested in how I spend my time? God knows you're always off about your business matters.'

'Do not fool y'rself. I am aware of every move ya make.'

'So you've been spying on me? Whose idea was this, I wonder - Mister Austin's? It would not surprise me in the least. That man has got the filthiest imagination.'

'Makes no difference how I know,' he snapped. 'The point is that I do.'

She drew a breath as though to argue, then relaxed against the wall. 'Oh really, Grandpapa, you make entirely too much of this. My brief ... relationship with Daniel is no worse than yours with all your coloured girls.'

The skin on Patrick's face turned crimson. 'This ... relationship ... may prove me downfall! What you've done could drive us t'the poorhouse!'

'You are ranting, Grandpapa. I'm truly sorry if you're feeling ill or business matters are not going well. But I am not the one responsible.'

'Y'r nigger is responsible! He's used ya. Can't ya see it?' 'How?' she challenged.

'T'gain access t'Bonnaire, of course. How else might he come sneakin' on me property unnoticed by the watchmen. Organise our workers. Spirit them away?'

'That's utter nonsense,' Harriot replied. 'Despite your high blown sense of self-importance, Grandpapa, the man is interested solely in myself. Perhaps if you could see beyond your own concerns you'd recognise the truth.'

'You are a fool if you believe that.'

'I am certain of it.'

'Very well then,' Patrick answered. 'Has y'r Daniel told ya he is livin' with a woman in Green Gully - with a coloured woman?'

Harriot sank down into a chair and grasped the armrests. 'You are lying. Daniel lives at Reverend Baker's mission. He has told me so himself.'

'Then he's the one who lies! I have a witness who has seen him in that village - seen them both together, day and night. You've been a pawn, m'dear, an instrument of no importance other than t'further Daniel's villainy against m'self.' He glared at her, observing how she sat immobilised, too horrified to speak. 'However,' he continued, 'thanks t'me, perhaps it need not be too late t'turn things round again. If you would merely twist the truth a bit accordin' t'me own instructions - swear that Daniel forced himself upon ya - we can see that upstart thrown in prison.'

'No! I shall not listen to your lies!' she cried and flung herself out of the chair.

'Be sensible! 'Tis not the time for useless tantrums,' Patrick shouted after her.

But Harriot was gone, along the gallery, out the front door and running for the stables.

'You are certain?' Daniel blurted. 'Absolutely certain?'

Sybil nodded, grinning shyly from beneath long lashes strung with tears of happiness.

He smiled and gathered her into his arms. 'We'll name him Daniel, yes? In honour of his father.'

'Maybe Sybil, fe she mumma.'

They burst together into happy laughter, hugging one another, rocking back and forth upon the bed inside their little cottage.

'We shall have to tell Pomelia and Tacooma,' Daniel rolled away to grasp a pair of trousers hanging on a chair. 'And then we shall inform the Reverend and Miss Lili.' Turning back, he found her sitting upright, fingers folded in her lap. 'Is something wrong?' He reached for Sybil's hand.

'De ministah ... Miss Lili ...' Sybil turned away, but not in time to hide the strain upon her face. 'Me know dem say we doin' sinful. Dey be vex bout baby, sure.'

'Not if we ask the Reverend to perform the wedding ceremony.'

'A marryin'? Fe true?'

'Of course. Did you suppose that I would want it any other way?'

She flung her arms around him, covered Daniel's cheeks with kisses. 'Sybil ready in a minute,' she exclaimed and jumped out of the bed. 'Den we say everybody!'

'Sure we knows you gonna marry,' cried Pomelia, grinning from ear to ear a while later after Daniel had announced the news.

'We only waitin' on de two of you come here fe sayin' so,' Tacooma added, hurrying out of his chair to hug the couple.

'Sure dis be a happy time. De bes' time since you comin' home,' Pomelia added. 'Me bayeyere a tata soon.' She trembled with the thrill of such reflection.

'*Daniel! Can you hear me? Come outside this instant!*'

The foursome pulled apart, amazed to hear a *buckra*-woman shouting just outside the cottage.

'I'll attend to this,' said Daniel motioning the others to

remain behind then turning, walking towards the door.

'So it is true! You live here with these niggers.'

'I am one of them.' Daniel answered evenly, confronting Harriot with eyes grown hard and resentful, as she slid down from her horse and stormed in his direction.

'What is it you want here?'

'Truth. If it is possible for you to speak it!'

'What truth in particular had you in mind?'

'You've used me, haven't you!'

'More accurately, we have used each other. Do you think I'm not aware that I am just another conquest meant to feed your pride. The situation is no different from the way your grandpapa exploits his coloured girls?'

'Then he is right! You never really wanted me. Your only interest was to find the means by which to ruin him.' She stopped, eyes wild with loathing as she gazed beyond his shoulder.

Daniel turned as Sybil stepped out of the cottage, features twisted with dismay. One look and he was sure she'd heard it all.

'And this I gather is your coloured whore - the nigger you've been living with?'

He moved to drape an arm round Sybil's shoulder. 'She will soon become my wife!' He spat the words and watched them cut.

'And is your wife-to-be aware that you've been sleeping in my bed? Have you described to her the things we've done together - all the times you said you loved me?'

'Never did I say I loved you!' Daniel shouted. 'Never once!'

'Your word against my own, Sir,' Harriot proclaimed. 'And so it must remain, without a witness to corroborate your lies!'

He turned to Sybil, searching in her eyes to see what she believed. The conflict and confusion there reflected deep, excruciating pain.

'I swear I never said I loved her. I never even thought

it,' Daniel whispered. 'Being with this woman was the only way that I could steal into Bonnaire without discovery.'

'You are an idiot if you believe him,' Harriot insisted. 'Daniel is a womaniser. When he's had his fill he shall betray you, lie about you, just the way he's done with me.'

Sybil gaped at Harriot, then linked her arm through Daniel's. 'Dis man gonna be me *adwo* soon. Me husban'. Is no udder woman what him wan'.'

'We'll see about that!' Harriot proclaimed. 'The two of you shall never wed.'

'You cannot stop it,' Daniel answered.

'Grandpapa will stop it. He will have you thrown in prison. I shall see to it!' She whirled and climbed back up onto her mare.

'There's nothing he can do about it,' Daniel called.

'You'd better think again,' she snapped. 'I will be the gallows for the likes of you before I'm done!'

'Miss Lili, Reveren' Andrew, quick!' Pomelia and Tacooma burst in through a doorway, hurried down the aisle. 'Is trouble come. You gots to help!'

'My goodness, what has happened?' Lili set the pile of hymnals she'd been counting back upon the podium and hurried down the platform steps behind her husband.

'Daniel gonna die fe sure,' Pomelia wailed. 'Dat Massa Patrick comin' in Green Gully. He snatch him soon fe t'rowin' in de workhouse.'

'Please compose yourselves; explain this slowly.' Andrew motioned them onto a wooden bench.

In trembling tones Tacooma told what Harriot had said. 'Dat *buckra*-lady gonna swear him force she. Say me Daniel do a ting what's cause fe hangin'. Soon she fadder come wid all dem *buckras*!'

Andrew turned to Lili. 'It is likely. Men like Patrick Sloane will have no difficulty spreading lies and convincing others.'

Lili's face turned pale. 'Then Daniel must be hidden!'

'Yes. But where?' said Andrew. 'What do you suggest?'  
'Ashanti Town,' she rasped. 'The only place where we can hide him safely. Come, Tacooma. We shall go at once.'

'You can't be serious!' cried Andrew. 'You cannot go riding up into those mountains. It is far too dangerous!'

'It is my duty.'

'It is well beyond your duty!' Andrew rose, attempting to detain her as she tried to leave. 'Tis madness - far too great a risk. I must forbid it.'

'But I have to!' Lili wrenched away. 'He is my son!' She turned and raced out of the chapel, sobbing loudly.

Andrew gaped in the direction she had run, immobilised and trembling, eyes grown wide with disbelief. 'Her ... son?' he echoed weakly.

Instantly, Tacooma and Pomelia were beside him, arms around his shoulders. Knowingly they gazed at one another, stiff with tension at the sound of Andrew's weeping.

'Come,' Tacooma whispered, guiding Andrew back into his seat. 'Is time me tink fe say de Reveren' what be so.'

## 35

The sense of being bludgeoned by her past, of having lost the man she loved, tormented Lili, wounding her deeply. Sadly, she rode through the Cockpit country, moving towards that place where she had tasted failure and the bitterness of banishment. Behind her she could hear the sound of Daniel following on horseback. She pictured in her mind his handsome face. He was her contribution to the world she realised wistfully, the only legacy of value



she could hope to leave when she was gone. Indeed, her own life seemed almost over; a waste perhaps, a thing of fits and starts. But his was just beginning, its potential yet unrealised and for Daniel's sake she knew she had to do whatever might be asked of her, agree to anything in order to prevent him from becoming one more victim of her sad, unfortunate mistakes.

The site of what had been Ashanti Town appeared before them. It was overgrown, neglected, seeming, as the world believed, to have been abandoned long ago. But she knew otherwise, could feel the emanations of another presence reaching out, engaging her, directing her beyond the crumbling shacks and kitchen middens towards a single building set apart.

'This is the cottage of your great, great-grandmama,' said Lili, whispering to Daniel as he stopped his horse beside her own. 'Wait here. I'd better have a word with her in private.'

Daniel leaned across to gaze sorrowfully into her eyes. 'If only it were possible to change this situation, and undo the past. I never should have come back to Jamaica, never should have taken it upon myself ...'

'Hush. What you did was right.' She placed a finger on his lips and slid it round to trace his jawline. 'What is meant to be must be,' she murmured. 'None of us can change that. Only God is so empowered.' Swallowing her pain she let herself down from the saddle, filled her lungs with air and stepped up to the little house, prepared to sell her soul if necessary in exchange for Daniel's safety.

Creaking hinges squealed in protest as she eased the wooden door ajar. For a moment Lili felt herself transported backward to a morning when she'd seen Ashanti men and women gather round *Okomfo*, to that day so long ago when she had almost felt herself believing.

Lili halted in the doorway, stunned by women's voices praying in the language of the old land - voices that she hadn't heard for twenty years. Afraid to breathe or make a

sound, she stared in fascination, smiling tentatively when Mirtilla turned and saw her, raising a hand for silence then inching in her direction.

'Juba-Lili, what you doin' here?' The ancient woman hugged her tightly.

'I must speak with Granny,' Lili whispered, answering the question in Mirtilla's troubled eyes.

'Not good. Not good,' Mirtilla warned. 'You Granny be too sickly now, too ol' fe makin' hard-mout'.'

'I've not come to argue with her,' Lili promised. 'Please, Mirtilla. 'Tis my boy, my son, in danger. Only Fushabah can help him, hide him.'

In the farthest corner of the room a tiny figure turned upon a *morrosh*, spindly arms stretched upward, fingers splayed. Possessed by need, unable to endure the waiting, Lili rushed across the earthen floor then stopped, unable to absorb the ravages of time that greeted her: the withered body and Granny's face, a skull encased in thinnest parchment - sightless eyes turned milky white.

'Good ... afternoon, Great-grandmama,' she stammered. 'I've returned to you.'

The old one held her palms up, grinning toothlessly, confused. 'You fool me, *Nyankupon*. You playin' *trickify* wid you *Okomfo*, yes? Ol' Fushabah, she hear dat horse what's come fe take she 'way ...'

'No, no - 'tis I. In truth!' Beyond all hesitation, Lili rushed to join the wizened creature, clasped the woman's hands and pressed the bony fingers to her cheeks. ''Tis Juba-Lili, Granny. *Oba-nana*. Do you remember me?'

The trembling fingertips investigated Lili's forehead, tested the configurations of her nose and cheeks, the softness of her hair. The old one gasped, drew back.

'What for you comin' here? You dead. You gone. You turn you back on Granny long time. Long time ...'

'No, that isn't so. I swear it,' Lili whimpered. 'I did not forsake you, Granny. 'Twas yourself who turned me out, who ordered me to go, remember?'

Wrinkled lips began to quiver; little fists balled

stubbornly. '*Obi nton no koko bere kwa ... Is no one sell de layin' hen widdout good reason!*'

'And what was that reason?' Lili cried, the pain and the injustice of the past resurfacing to torture her anew. 'Because I wished to live a life that I'd created? That I wasn't able to fulfill your plans for me? That I would dare to want to make a future of my own?' Her eyes filled up with angry tears.

'You turn your back. You leave you people. Marry wid de *buckra*-man. You *buckra*-lady now, same like de res'!

'And what about my son - your great, great-grandson? He's no *buckra*-man and yet you have rejected him as well. Have you forgotten Daniel? Do you not remember that Tacooma and Pomelia took him in and raised him as their own when you would not?'

The old one paused, her manner softened with regret. 'Him gone now, far, far 'way from dem what's lovin' him. Same like him mummal!'

Lili drew back, startled, suddenly perceiving an attachment she had never known existed. 'No, he has returned. He has come back to help our people, to assume his rightful place upon this island as a free man and a coloured man. A man you can be proud of, Granny, just as I am proud of him.' Impulsively she took the woman's hands again and held them in her own. 'He is so filled with life and spirit - fine, Ashanti spirit - so much like yourself and like Tacooma and Mirtilla - like my mother, too, I should imagine ...'

'But him livin' all dese year wid *buckras*. Like Juba-Lili. Gone from we an' los' to de Ashanti ...'

'*Abusua bako, mogya bako ... One tribe, one blood.* That does not change. The Sky God, *Nyankupon*, has said so.'

Lili spun around, unable to believe her ears. Transfixed, amazed, she gaped at Andrew ducking through the doorway, stepping through the shadows with Pomelia and Tacooma, Juliatt and Sybil close behind him.

'We are all in this together.' Andrew gazed self-consciously at Lili, speaking in the gentlest whispers. 'We have come to be with you and Daniel.'

'Who dat comin' now?' The old one snatched the cane beside her, held it high as though to ward off devils.

'It is Andrew, Granny.' Lili gulped. 'My husband - Reverend Baker.'

'*Obrafo ... murderer!*' the old one spat. 'You steal me *Oba-nana*. T'ief me people. Take dem 'way from *Nyankupon!*'

'I've stolen nothing. 'Tis not possible. *Nnipa nhina ye Onyame mma, obi nye, asase ba ... All men are children of the Supreme Being; no one is a child of earth.* You know that, I am sure.'

The priestess drew her knees up, quivering, and pressing her shoulders flat against the wall. 'You say dem word from Guinea. How you know such? How you do dat?'

With a wistful smile at Lili, Andrew moved to squat beside the priestess. 'I was raised in Guinea also, not too far from Kumassi. I knew your people well. My parents loved them, taught them, ministered to them until the day they died.' His gaze slipped downward and his voice grew softer. 'I was forced to leave my mother and my father in the old land just as you were, Granny. We have more in common than perhaps you are aware of.'

Fushabah reached out, attempting to escape. She felt Lili on one side of her and Andrew on the other. Trapped, she crossed her arms and sank down again. 'Is nothin' what be same fe we. You *buckra*-man.'

'What of it?' Andrew answered, unintimidated by the look of shock upon the old one's face - the frown of indignation. 'Does that mean I have no heart? No soul? Is that what *Nyankupon* has taught you? Look again!'

The old one grunted, drawing back into herself. '*Akomfo adusa fwe oyarefo a, wodi atoro ... When thirty priests attend a sick man some of them are lying.*'

'Yes, perhaps. But which?' the Reverend challenged. 'Or might it be otherwise: that some of them are simply

misinformed? Consider this, for one example ...' Reaching out, he touched the medallion hanging round her neck and lifted it upon its leather thong. 'Twelve tribes, from whose blood all Ashanti come. The white men also have these tribes - the twelve lost tribes of Israel - and there are priests among us, scholars claiming they can prove these are the very same.'

*'Oguanten nwo aberekyi ... A sheep does not give birth to a goat!'*

'But who's to say which is the sheep and which is the goat? Your *Nyame* whom you call *Nyankupon*, the Sky God, are you absolutely certain He is not the same as our beloved Heavenly Father? And His son, *Ta Kora*, the Redeemer. Can you prove to me He is not Jesus Christ?' He paused, observing that the words were starting to take hold, beginning to impress. 'I could continue endlessly, dear lady. There are many, many similarities and unexplained coincidences.' Andrew glanced at Lili, seeking her with eyes that flashed their yearning, smouldered with need for her. 'But the most important thing about our Lord is that He teaches us to reach beyond ourselves, that He is merciful and loves us even as we sin, despite our frailties. If we are to reflect His wishes, His commands, we have to cherish one another - understand - accept that those we love are merely human. Otherwise, religion merely separates us from the universe and from the will of God.'

The others gazed at him with serious expressions of thoughtfulness and contemplation. Even Fushabah seemed taken with his logic, moved by Andrew's generous and unexpected point of view. 'Say more,' she ordered, reaching for his sleeve and edging closer. 'Say *Okomfo* bout dem ting from Guinea ...'

Andrew was about to when the peaceful atmosphere was shattered by a thundering of hooves and an assault of heated voices moving towards the cottage.

'Circle round the house. Be sure there is no other exit!' Billy Austin's harsh commands rang through the sultry air above the shouts of others.

'They are here! They have discovered us!' cried Daniel, bursting through the doorway. 'There are dozens, armed with rifles!'

'Stay inside and protect the women!' Andrew started for the door. 'I shall attempt to calm the situation, speak to them.' He hurried out, oblivious to Lili following.

She stood amidst commotion, deafened by the shouts of men who burst in waves out of the forest road to form a solid wall three deep. A clattering of wheels behind them and the barrier divided to reveal a carriage struggling uphill, bearing Patrick Sloane and Justice Brisbane.

'Finally I've got ya!' Patrick shouted, leering at Lili. 'I am not surprised t'find ya with 'im - all together like a den o' thieves.' He pointed straight at Daniel standing in the doorway. 'There's y'r criminal, Y'r Lordship. He's the one we're after!'

Billy Austin leaped down from his horse and hurried towards the cottage. 'I shall bring 'im to ya, Mister Sloane.'

'Not quite so fast,' said Andrew, stepping out to block the path. 'What is the charge here?'

'There are several,' Patrick cried. 'Suffice t'say this nigger's forced 'imself upon me grandchild.'

'Have you witnesses?' demanded Andrew. 'Where's your proof?'

'I am the proof, the living proof!' cried Harriot as she stepped from the carriage, eyes ablaze. 'Shall I describe what happened, what he did to me, the way I have been brutally abused?'

'No need to go into the details here and now,' said Justice Brisbane. 'Sad enough we'll have t'hear it all in open court.'

'But she is lying!' Lili cried. 'This is another ploy. One more of Mister Sloane's attempts to ruin anyone who countermands his wishes. Are you not aware his workers have deserted him? Because of Daniel they have found employment elsewhere. That is what disturbs the man. The rest is humbug!'

'Nonsense!' Patrick sneered. 'I treat m'coloureds

royally - pay decent wages in accordance with the law. 'Tis Missus Baker bears a grudge against me 'cause she forfeited Bonnaire.' He turned to his companions, grinning smugly. 'Surely I am not t'blame if ladies take it in their heads t'enter into business and destroy themselves.'

A burst of laughter from his allies.

'Dat not so. Is *him* what burn Bonnaire - dat Massa Patrick an' him *busha*, Billy Austin. Dey de same what make dat fire. Me hears dem sayin' such!' Juliett emerged into the open, glaring hatefully at Patrick.

Livid, spluttering, he turned to face the judge. 'A marvellous concoction,' Patrick growled. 'But Jason, certainly you will not take this nigger's word above me own?'

The magistrate smiled tightly, motioned Juliett a little closer. 'What you're telling me is hearsay, madam. I cannot proceed without a witness to the actual occurrence. Were there someone who had *seen* the fire set ...'

'An' what about a killin'? What if someone see dat Massa Patrick stick de knife in Mistah Charles? Who listen to de negga?'

Pomelia's words turned every head in her direction as she shuffled through the doorway, blinking at the light, discomfited to find herself the centre of attention.

'Seize that woman. Silence her!' cried Patrick. 'She's a fugitive, a slave of mine who ran away. She, too, belongs in prison ...'

'I shall stop 'er soon enough,' said Billy, lifting up his rifle.

'Do, and you shall hang for it!' The voice of Justice Brisbane froze the overseer in his tracks. 'Indeed, I think that I should like to hear this.' As he spoke he beckoned to Pomelia, motioned her up to the carriage. 'What you've said is of the utmost gravity,' he warned. 'Unless you're absolutely certain ...'

'Pommie swear is true!' she answered, gazing fervently into his eyes. 'Me hidin' near de window, watchin' when de Massa do de ting, an' hearin' how him say fe Miss

Victoria preten' dat she de one what kill she husban'.'

'Patrick?' Justice Brisbane turned to face the man beside him. 'It appears that you have lied to me, betrayed our friendship ...'

'No I haven't, Jason. I would never ...' Desperate, he cast about in search of rescue. 'Billy! Tell His Lordship,' Patrick pleaded. 'You were there!'

'Indeed he was!' cried Daniel. 'Mister Austin, tell His Lordship how you snatched me from Green Gully shortly afterwards - and why. A perfect method to insure my mother's silence, wouldn't you agree?' He turned in the direction of the judge. 'If not for Mrs Baker, Sir, I should have surely starved to death in Mister Sloane's own cellar!'

'Liar!' Patrick screamed and grabbed at Brisbane's sleeve.

'Tis *you* who killed my father!' Harriot cried out. 'You killed him and you stole his house! You lied to me! You told me that my mother - *your own daughter* - was a murderess!'

'I think, Sir, you had better come with us,' the magistrate proclaimed. 'And Mister Austin, you as well.'

At once the others moved to reinforce the order, pressing round the guilty pair, disarming them, conveying them into the makeshift prison of the carriage.

In the months that followed, all Trelawny was abuzz with rumour, gossip, details of the scandal. Every week it seemed new evidence came forth as merchantmen, smallholders, whites and Negroes who had borne the pain of grave injustice, rose from silence to avenge themselves against the man responsible. Indeed, the fact of Patrick's treachery seemed unequivocal; most everybody thought he'd hang and few were honestly surprised to learn one day that he had taken poison.

'I am sorry Mister Sloane is not alive to see this,' Lili was reflecting as she stood on deck with Andrew, watching wagon-loads of sugar being loaded on the



wharves. 'To think the time would come when coloureds in Jamaica would be selling crops transported from their very own estates. A miracle!'

'A fine beginning,' Andrew answered, squeezing Lili's hand. 'A blessing surely to see Oxford Hall and Allamanda Hall divided into smaller parcels, sold to people who were born in slavery. Still, there is so very much to do ...'

Their talk was interrupted by the cheerful voice of Captain Avery calling to them from a hatchway. 'We are almost finished,' he announced, eyes twinkling. 'One more hour at most and it is done.' He moved across and leaned against the railing, feigning great exhaustion. 'Then we can begin the task of moving your belongings to the Great House. 'Twill be much the same as old times, Lili, don't you think?'

The couple glanced at one another, smiling wistfully.

'We have decided, Lili and myself, to go on living at the Mission,' Andrew answered.

'But Bonnaire is yours again. I do not understand.'

'A wedding present - months belated,' Lili told him. 'For the happy bride and groom.'

'You can't be serious,' said Avery. 'Such a mansion as Bonnaire for just the two of them?'

'There'll be another any day, have you forgotten? And besides, Pomelia and Tacooma will be living there. And Fushabah as well, I'm glad to say. Mirtilla finally convinced her, with a little help from Reverend Baker.' Lili pressed her cheek to Andrew's shoulder, smiling lovingly into his eyes.

'Can anyone assist me?' Emily appeared half buried underneath the bulk of half a dozen skirts and crinolines across her arms. 'Oh Lili dear - just wait until you see the costume I am wearing to the christening.'

'My goodness! I'd entirely forgotten. I have nothing suitable myself!'

'Of course you have. A trunkful!' Emily announced, her arms extended, offering the clothes to Lili. 'These are yours. A gift from Uncle Avery and myself.' She eyed her

niece approvingly. 'Thank heavens you have kept your figure.'

'Emily, you didn't! How can I express my gratitude?'

'By finding us a place to live, if you're intent on doing something. I have finally convinced your uncle that the time has come to spend a little time with me instead of sailing off again. What better place to settle down and reunite with one's own family, don't you think? Unless our presence here would be a bother ...'

'Bother?' Andrew echoed, stepping in between Aunt Emily and Uncle Avery, offering an arm to each. 'Why just this morning, I was telling Lili of a spot near St. Ann's Bay which could be purchased at a very reasonable price to build a schoolhouse and a residence. If you and Avery would be willing to contribute shall we say, a thousand pounds ...'

The foursome moved together down the gangplank, caught up in discussion, laughing, loving one another, making plans.

In the stifling heat of Jamaica great fortunes  
and nameless lusts grew side by side beneath  
the burning plantation sky.

Many lives were sacrificed to build the  
mansion of Bonnaire. The lives of black men  
and women who died broken in slavery. The  
lives of white masters and mistresses  
consumed with greed and ruined by lust.

Now the half-caste Lili rules the steaming  
plantation and the great house. Her land and  
her body are coveted by the rapacious Patrick  
Sloane, lord of the neighbouring estate of  
Oxford Park and wanton despoiler of nubile  
slaves. Lili's brother Charles – master of  
Allamanda Hall – will defend his sister against  
Patrick's raging obsession, but bloody  
rebellion and furious desire simmer beneath  
the surface as Bonnaire threatens to erupt  
once more with surging uncontrollable  
violence.

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